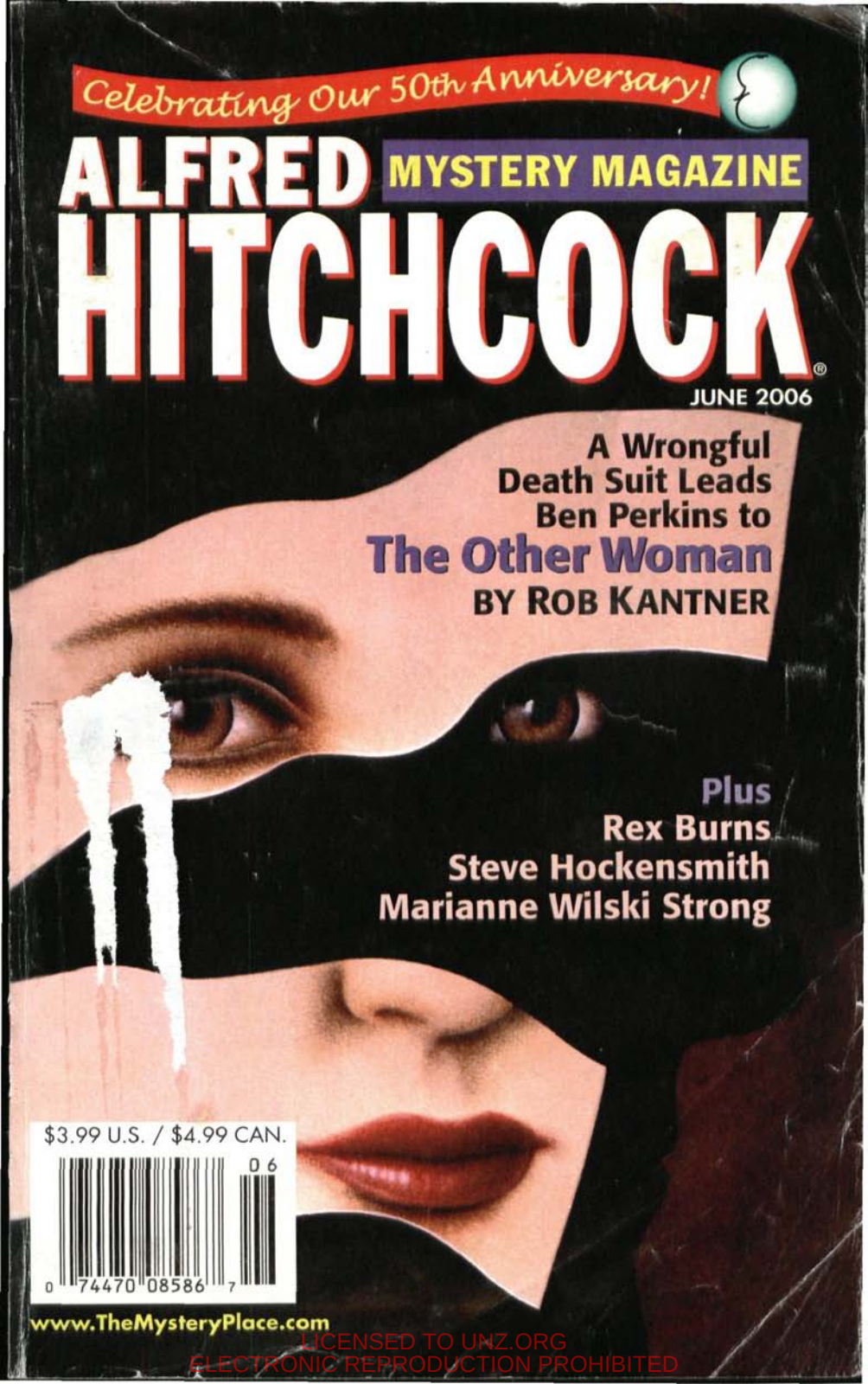

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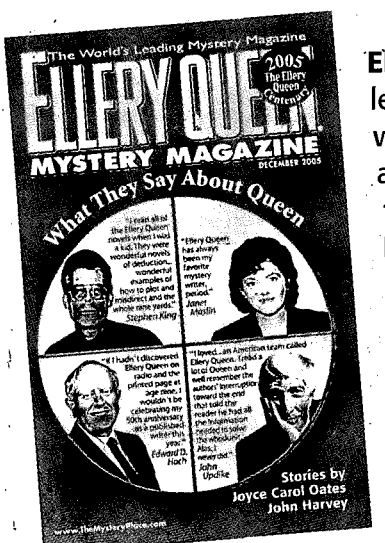

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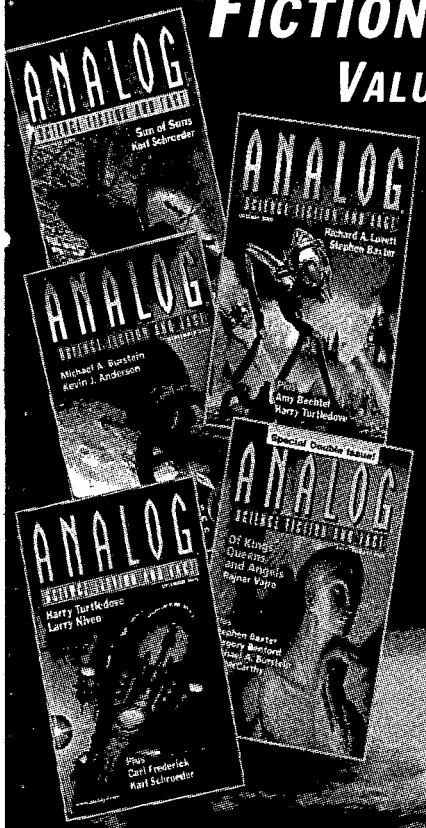

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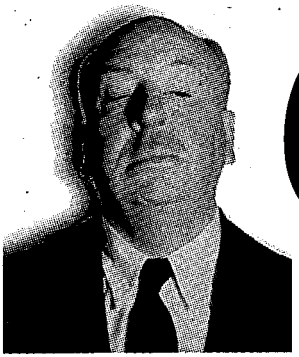

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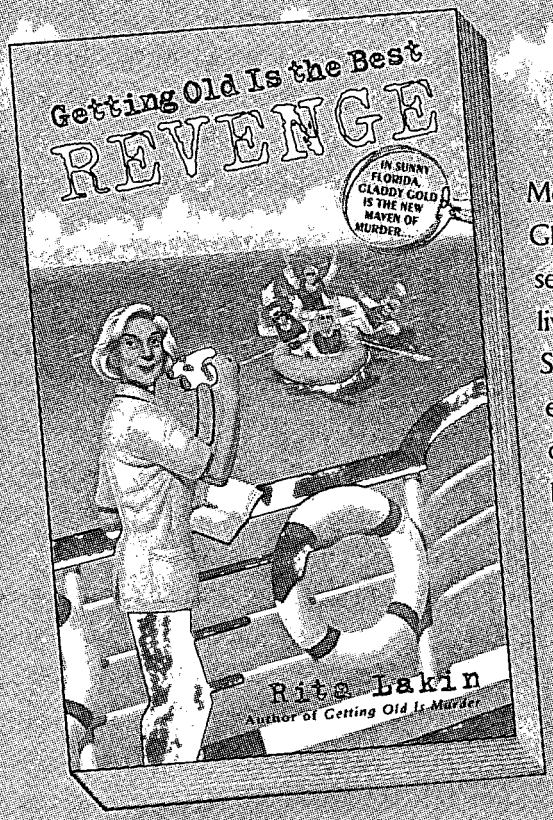
"Gladdy Gold is a treasure—
Miss Marple in Yiddish.
SALTY. SASSY. SUNNY!"

—Carolyn Hart, author of *Murder Walks the Plank*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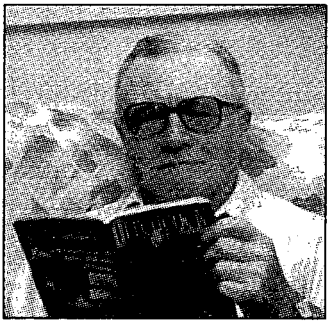
EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

CRIMINAL MASTERMINDS

Do crossword puzzles and mysteries go hand in hand? It's been my observation that many mystery readers are also avid puzzle solvers.

Certainly, AHMM's "Unsolved" feature has been a consistent reader favorite. We have been especially fortunate for many years to be able to feature the challenging logic problems of Robert V. Kesling. It is with great sadness, therefore, that we report Mr. Kesling's death on Christmas Day 2005 at the age of eighty-eight.



Robert V. Kesling

A paleontologist and professor at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor (on campus he was tagged "Dr. Dinosaur"), Mr. Kesling was a weather forcaster for the Army Air Corps during World War II, and was a retired colonel in the U.S.A.F. Reserves. An avid gardner, Mr. Kesling also enjoyed fishing and traveling. AHMM began publishing his logic puzzles in 1993, and when we added mystery-themed acrostic puzzles to our mix, Mr. Kesling began creating acrostics for us too. His creativity and spirit lives on as an inspiration to us all.

This month's line up of stories includes a number of traditional puzzle mysteries. Our cover story, "The Other Woman" by Rob Kantner, features the blue-collar Detroit P.I. Ben Perkins, whose investigation into a wrongful death suit takes a few gnarly twists. Marianne Wilski Strong's story "Death at Delphi" pits the logic of the Sophist Kleides and the quick thinking of his mistress against a killer in politically turbulent ancient Greece.

"Breathing a Fine Stone Mist" by Robert Gray takes place in the changing town of Millbridge, Vermont, and is a probing character study as well as a crafty crime story. Steve

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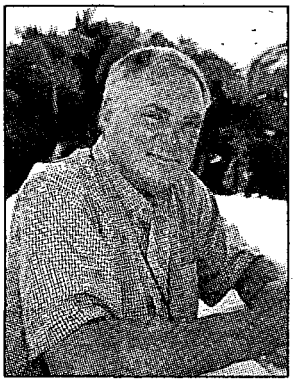
Hockensmith also explores the effect of crime and character in his rather dark tale, "Didn't Do Nothing."

We introduce two new authors to AHMM this month. Rex Burns, a professor emeritus of English at the University of Colorado at Denver, drew on his travels in West Australia for "Shadow People," which introduces Aborigine Liaison Constable Leonard Smith, who is from the world's largest police district, the Kimberly. Mr. Burns's first novel, *The Alvarez Journal*, introduced Denver homicide detective Gabe Wagner and received an Edgar award for Best First Mystery. He has since published ten more novels in that series, three novels that feature ex-secret servant agent–turned P.I. Devlin Kirk, and he plans to introduce a new series featuring ALC Smith soon.



Rex Burns. Photo by Susan Weston

Sarah Weinman, author of "Politics and Poker," is a native of Ottawa, Ontario, who holds a degree in forensic science from John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City, where she now resides. In addition to publishing short stories, she is the crime fiction columnist for the *Baltimore Sun*, but she is perhaps most well known as the author of the popular crime and mystery fiction blog Confessions of an Idiosyncratic Mind (www.sarahweinman.com/confessions).

Once again as part of our 50th anniversary celebration this year, we bring you a mystery classic from our back issues, another puzzle that we expect will stay with you. "The Maxnome Riddle" by Earle N. Lord was originally published in AHMM in May 1971.

Mysterious meetings and readerly rendezvous are available in The Readers Forum at www.TheMysteryPlace.com.

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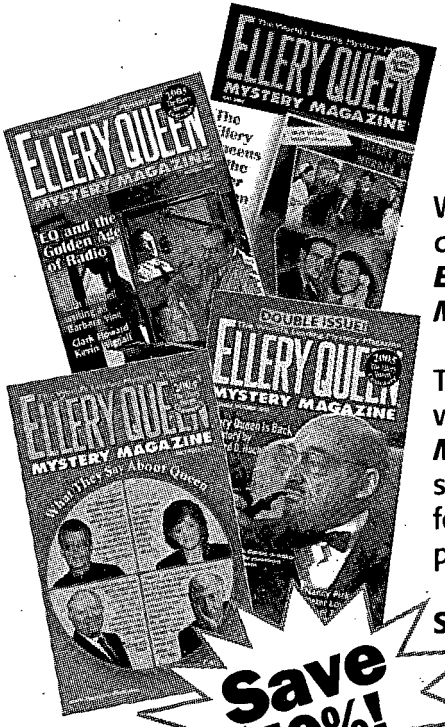

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SHADOW PEOPLE

REX BURNS

Constable Leonard Smith had been temporarily attached to the Broome Police Station for the purpose of locating a runaway white youth. The three-day search sent him on a thousand kilometer circuit of the monsoon-soaked Kimberley outback. Now, on this hot and rainy Monday afternoon, he splashed his well-used Toyota 4Runner down the Cape Leveque Road to report a successful outcome to Senior Sergeant Dougald.

Between walls of thick brush, the long stretch of red mud was mostly empty. Broome's white population sought refuge from the rain in the town's taverns, where pool tables and alcohol helped them ignore the steady drum on corrugated iron roofs. The coming of the Dry in autumn meant sunshine. It meant money and the new faces of increasing numbers of tourists. It meant talk of a world beyond the vacant line of the Indian Ocean or the equally flat horizon of the Roebuck Plains.

Most Aborigines—Yawuru and remnants of other skin groups—called the town "Rubibi," and did their drinking under trees scattered in its small parks. Wet season or Dry, you could see them sitting, lying down, passed out, like shadows in the shadows. Shadows on the earth, shadows on the soul. Shadow people. That's what crossed Leonard's mind as he jounced toward a woman whose wooly hair was streaked with gray and whose cotton dress was painted to her skinny shape by rain to show that she wore no undergarments. She lurched drunkenly into the track and Leonard swerved, fighting the wheels' slip in the mud.

Suddenly, he recognized her and pulled the Tojo onto the grassy shoulder. Rolling down his window steamed by the humidity, he called after the woman. "Miss Daisy—Bibi Daisy!"

The figure, swaying slightly in the warm rain, paused to stare back at the vehicle with its police decals half buried under mud. She was a distant cousin through Leonard's mother's family, and when he had been orphaned, she had gathered him among her brood until he was sent to the state home. Leonard still referred to her with the Yawuru word for his mother's sister. He felt a

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spasm of guilt that his visits to her home had slowed to almost nothing. Now her bloodshot eyes bulged slightly as she tried to make out his face in the overcast gray light. "Leonard? You Leonard-the-copper?"

"Hop in—I'll give you a ride home." Her twenty or so kilometer walk up the Manari Road past Cape Latrille would take the old woman well into darkness, if she were sober enough to make it at all. Leonard could drive there and back in an hour or two, though he shouldn't—S. S. Dougald expected his report directly. But the sergeant always preached greater initiative to the Aboriginal constables, and Leonard could say he took the initiative to check for vehicles stranded in the mud of the lonely road. She grabbed for the handle of the door and lurched in, bringing with her a musty smell of smoke, plonk sweat, and something indefinable but rooted in childhood memory. She sat without speaking and stared through the misty window screen. Leonard reversed and turned and headed back north. After a proper silence he said, "You come to town a lot." It was the polite way of asking a question without asking a question.

A jounce or two more and the spray of wiry gray and black hair nodded. "Get money now." Her black face split into a wide grin and she shrugged. "Every fortnight, *jinjie* bring money for me."

The word wasn't Yawuru; the woman used the Nyungar language for "ghost." It was a trick to confuse the spirit and keep it away from her, since even a ghost that brought money could also bring harm. And, Leonard thought wryly, given that any money always went for plonk wine, it brought more harm than good.

He groped on the floor for his rucksack and pulled out the remainder of his ham sandwich. "You eat this tucker, okay?" She would not have wasted the money on food.

"Ah—okay—good boy. You copper but good boy anyway!"

The white teeth, gapped here and there by empty spaces, flashed again as she tore into the sandwich.

Leonard turned up the air-conditioning and churned into the deeper mud of the Manari track. After a while, the woman snored, her breath spreading the odor of sour wine and her head thumping occasionally against the window. When the vehicle lurched onto a path marked faintly across the grassy verge, the woman awoke.

"My house now, eh?" Her lips smacked with dryness as she blinked and stared out. "Okay to let me out here."

"It's a ways yet."

"Too much trees down. Big wind come—no track now."

"No worries. I'll take you as far as I can."

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The grayness thickened with enveloping brush. Leonard eased the lurching vehicle past the scrape and drag of branches. The dark blur of a kangaroo bounded away into the shrub. Ahead, where a fallen tree blocked the road, a grassy patch offered space to turn around. He pulled up and shut off the motor.

"Come on, Bibi. I'll walk you home."

"No need. I be okay."

"You do me this favor, Bibi. It'll make me feel better to see you home safe."

The bloodshot eyes stared at him for a long moment. "You part waijela—*jinjie* no fuss up waijela, so okay."

Waijela—an Aboriginal pronunciation of "white fella." He wasn't certain that *jinjies* respected that half of him. But his general ignorance of Aboriginal beliefs seemed to protect him from the many dangers of the spirit world—or so he liked to believe.

They stepped over the thick trunk of the fallen tree, following a long bend toward the old station house. It had reverted to Daisy when the Native Title Claimants Act returned Aboriginal land illegally seized by squatters. The square, single-story cottage had deep verandas formed by the overhang of the rusty iron roof. Beneath the verandas, a scattering of tattered folding chairs brought memories to Leonard of the sense of family he had briefly experienced here. Thick bougainvillea vines writhed up the posts to form a living fringe along the veranda's edge. Half a century ago, the squatter who originally seized the land planted them and the surrounding grove of palm trees that made the grounds parklike. The trees, the cottage, and its name—Wignall Station—were all the squatter left when he disappeared, some said south to Perth, others said north to Darwin. Leonard remembered the clerk at the state home enrolling him as "Smith, Leonard (mix) from Wignall Station, near Barred Creek."

Leonard gazed around. "You live alone, now." Through a screen of *mulga*, he glimpsed the sea where he used to roam on the sandy beach below the bluffs.

She nodded. "Babas all gone." Her long fingers flapped at the surrounding world into which her four children had wandered. Her bare heels clumped up the two wooden steps and across rattling porch boards. She seemed more sober now, almost on guard. When she opened the unlocked door it was with caution, and she paused to look around the small front room before crossing the threshold.

Here and there, bare stone blocks showed through missing plaster. Cracked glass in the windows had been mended with cellotape or replaced with squares of pressed wood. The fireplace

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mantel showed black where the chimney had ceased to draw properly. But the sooty cooking pans were stacked clean and neat on the stone of the hearth, and the bare floorboards were swept. Both corners of the fireplace were broken, the structure stepped where bricks were missing. Through an open door that led to the single bedroom, Leonard could see a fresh gouge in the wall. Three large, squared stones sat crookedly without masonry, and on the floor beneath was a fresh scatter of cement dust.

The woman drew her breath and stared at the gouge. Then she looked at Leonard, bloodshot eyes bulging. "He come again," she whispered.

"The *jinjie*?"

Her lips clamped at the word as her eyes searched the dark corners of the house. She pointed at the broken corners of the fireplace. "Other times there. Outside too. Digs around house."

Leonard studied the fireplace, the scarred wall. "I can give you a ride back to Rubibi."

She thought about that, then shook her head. "No. My house. Boss paper say this be Aboriginal land!" She added loudly as if ears might be listening somewhere, "This my family house—I stay!"

He waited for the woman's anger to abate, waited in silence while the breath in her flared nostrils became normal. But she said nothing more. Instead, she squatted on the scarred planks in front of the fireplace and rocked gently forward and back, chanting something to herself. Leonard did not know if it was a prayer or a spell—the elders had denied him knowledge of many ceremonies because of his white blood.

"I have to go back," he said finally. "Sergeant's expecting me."

It was as if she did not hear him, and perhaps she didn't. Her voice rose and fell in a whispery croon and she rocked, eyes half closed and fixed on the sooty back of the fireplace. Leonard said good-bye, but she did not answer. The thin chant followed him down the overgrown path toward his vehicle.

It was no *jinjie*. Leonard's hands steered the Tojo through the deep mud, but his mind was on Bibi Daisy. Even if it was a *jinjie*, it wouldn't have to run around digging holes in the walls—*jinjies* could see into places people could not. Or so it had been whispered to Leonard. But there were no *jinjies*. So it was pretty clear that somebody searched for something. But what? What could be hidden there?

S. S. Dougald was waiting. Leonard, even if he was only half Aborigine, could smell the man's anger the moment he swung the rain off his hat and rapped on the door of the OIC's office.

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"Damned glad to finally see you, Smith."

"Likewise, Senior Sergeant," he said cheerfully. A little cheer went a long way to irritate the man. "You tell Mr. Anders his boy's safe up at Stony Hill?"

The teenager, following a raging argument with his father, had flung himself out of his house. After twenty-four worried hours, a frowning father and weeping mother had come to the Broome police station to report him missing. A few words from the boy's mates, and S. S. Dougald had called for the district's Aboriginal Liaison Constable to visit the outback. More words from local Aboriginals had led Leonard to the isolated Stony Hill station where the boy had found work as a jackaroo.

"Of course I told them—after you called in two days ago. Where the bloody hell have you been since then?"

"The Jowalenga Road washed out at Fraser Crossing. I couldn't get back to the Great Northern Highway, so I came around by Country Downs Homestead. Stayed there overnight. They send their greetings, by the way."

"They have a radio there, Smith. You could have used it."

Leonard smiled more widely. "I didn't think you'd worry about me, Sergeant." In fact, he knew the S. S. would be happier if he did disappear into the bush. One part of the man's irritation was that bureaucrats over two thousand kilometers away in Perth had imposed the Aboriginal Liaison Program on the Kimberley District without any consultation at all. Nor did it help that Broome, like the other six police stations in the Kimberley District whose budgets were already tight, had to donate toward what they considered bureaucratic bull dust. In Dougald's eyes, they got damn little for it.

The older man stared for a long moment at Leonard, then at the litter on his desktop. In the cold fluorescent light, his face looked even more haggard. He wagged his head in slow disgust. "Bloody right! Got plenty else to fret over than a bludger like you."

"You've been busy, eh?"

"Up half the night with the Karenji brothers—Albert cutting Edgar, it looks like. Somebody, anyway, came damn close to doing him in permanently. So you earn your bleeding keep while you're here: Write your report on the Anders boy, and then go find out if Albert's sober enough to tell you what happened. The arresting officer couldn't get bugger-all out of him last night."

Leonard, taking a sheet of paper and settling at an empty desk, figured it would be a bad time to ask Sergeant Dougald if he could first have his afternoon smoke-oh.

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Constable Jones took Leonard's sheath knife and let him into the lock-up.

"Bit of a dust-up, I hear."

The stocky Welshman nodded. From Cell Two came a loud snore. "Sleeping like an angel, now."

"A bit pongie for an angel."

"Yeah, well, he does smell—" Jones started to say more but stopped. Leonard figured it would have been a comment about stinking Abos. But it didn't bother him: he was neither one, nor the other, and both halves showered. "What happened?"

"Albert and Edgar were down off Streeter's Jetty, howling like cats in heat. When Lathrop got there, he found Albert passed out and Edgar sliced like a wild pig." Jones drew a hand across his chest and stomach. "He wouldn't say who did it, but the sod'll have a good scar to show off."

"Pissed?"

"What else? Here," Jones unlocked the cell door, "he's all yours."

Leonard thumped the iron cot with his hand. "Oi—wake up. Wake up now—oi!"

One eye, mapped with veins, slitted open.

"You, Albert Karenji, what you do in here?"

"Who says my name?" The man struggled to sit, grunting against the throb in his skull.

"Constable Smith."

"Eh? Gubbmint man Smith? Swank-about-man, wear-collar Smith? Burnt-potato Smith?" The sourly grinning man repeated Leonard's name, "Smith-Smith-Constable Smith?"

Both men knew that the repetition of a person's name was an insult. It singled that person out from the clan, it drew the jealous attention of evil spirits, it was a dig at the whites' lack of manners. Sometimes Leonard wished he knew even less than he did of the Kriole dialect and its tapestry of insults. But then he wouldn't be an AL officer. He shook his head sadly. "You think maybe you kill your brother a little bit. But maybe what you done, you killed him proper. You do a shame job on your brother. Maybe now your brother come back for you, eh?"

Behind the tangle of his dark hair, Karenji's bloodshot eyes blinked. At first the man tensed, alert for something he would not name. Then anger sharpened the glitter of his eyes. "Who you think you be, try to talk Kriole. You talk rubbish Kriole. You stay in flash talk, Jack-o!"

"Constable Jack-o. And don't humbug me that you're a barefooted blackfella grew up in the camps." Karenji held anger at white blood even when mixed with black, Leonard knew, held

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anger at a half-caste who pretended to view the world as pure-bloods did. The anger reinforced the almost universal hatred of authority in general. Well, 'let them hate as long as they fear'—Leonard didn't remember where he had read the phrase, but for too many, white and black, it held truth. And if Albert Karenji wanted to keep his Kriole from contamination by someone he considered an enemy, no problems. The aim was to get information about the injury and its cause. "Your brother's in hospital. Looks bad for him. You tell me about it—why you two fought."

Worry replaced anger. "How bad?"

"Don't know," Leonard said truthfully. "It's a big cut. Maybe infection sets in, maybe he lost too much blood to make it. Try to find out when I leave here."

The man thought that over, then his thick lips twisted in an ironic smile and he gave a John Wayne drawl. "That's mighty black of you, Constable Smith."

Leonard could not help a laugh, and its sound evaporated the anger that had filled the cell. He sat on the other bunk and leaned back against its rolled mattress. "Tell me about it, Albert," he said quietly. "What set off you two blokes?"

"Ah—who knows. Grog—flagons." He shrugged. "Can't remember clear. We drank so much, something started a fight. Can't remember."

"Drank up your day's pay?"

"No. No work—didn't have any. Rode on a ute from the Reserve. Saw Miss Daisy going foot-Falcon along the road and gave her a ride, and she gave us some money." His eyes widened. "She okay? We fight with her too? She get hurt?"

"She's not hurt. Plenty plonked, but she's home now."

A nod, and the man's torso sank back in a slouch.

"You cut your brother."

"Think so. Maybe a bottle cut. Don't remember what for. Maybe a long-ago thing, some fight from before." He shrugged again with a mix of resignation and self-disgust. "Drunk."

It was Leonard's turn to nod. "Miss Daisy say where she got money?"

He had to consider for a moment. "Ghost money, she said—money left on her verandah. Share some good luck, she said, and gave us a bleeding tenner!"

Ten dollars for the Karenji's and enough left to pay for her own drunk. Leonard asked a few more questions, then used Constable Jones's telephone to call the hospital.

The ward clerk said Edgar Karenji's wound was serious but not life threatening and he was resting under sedation. "He should be

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discharged in seventy-two hours, but he will need to avoid exertion and see a physician regularly for a few weeks."

Leonard thanked the woman and used a corner of Jones's desk to write his report on the fight for Sergeant Dougald.

Looking up from the sheet of paper, he asked Jones, "You live here in town or further out?"

"In town. Over on Stainton Place."

"Like it?"

"Price is right and I walk to work, kids walk to school. Save bloody-all on petrol and the missus has the car. But the cost of housing's bloody well insane now, and not much new being built." He explained, "Most of the land that's left belongs to traditional owners who don't want to sell."

"Some new motels and development are out near the airport."

"Right—but that was the last open land. Broome's a big tourist place now, and unless somebody figures out how to free up more land for development, prices are going higher than anybody can afford. So don't get your hopes up about moving here."

Leonard shook his head. "Got a caravan up in Derby. Don't see much of it, though. Usually on the road."

Jones grunted. "The Kimberley's a big district."

It was: 421,000 square kilometers. Three times the size of Britain, Leonard had read in a training manual. And there was a lot of it he hadn't yet visited. "Was Miss Daisy drinking with the Karenji brothers?"

"Not when the fight took place. She usually gins it up over by the courthouse."

"Usually?"

He nodded. "She's there every other weekend, it seems. Sometimes a bunch of them, sometimes just her."

Leonard thought. "Hear any talk about somebody searching for something?"

"What kind of something?"

"Buried treasure, like. But small. Something easily hidden maybe at an old station house around here."

The Welshman shook his head. "There are stories. You know, the perfect pearl someone stole sometime from some diving boat somewhere. That airplane full diamonds that was shot down by the Japanese back in the forties. Aunt Tillie's old map to her grandpa's gold mine. But anything like that," he lifted his hands in dismissal, "if it happened at all, the swag wouldn't be hid around here. Any bugger taking it would have sold it long ago and be living the life of Riley in London or New York. I mean, what the hell are you going to spend that much money on around here?"

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Jones was right. The whole idea of stealing was to get the goods and run someplace to sell it, not hide it here. He finished the brief report and stopped by the cell to let Albert know that his brother would live. Then he dropped the report in Sergeant Dougald's box and sloshed through puddles to the Roebuck Bay Hotel.

When in Broome, Leonard liked to eat at the Rowie. Unlike many restaurants in the town, it welcomed any color of skin as long as that skin could pay. The dining saloon, separate from the main bar, was usually quieter. Tonight he sat at the almost empty saloon bar rather than at a table. It gave him a view past the bottle cabinet into the larger, raucous barroom, with its ranks of heavy wooden tables, plank floor, loud, thumping music, and the adjoining billiards room filled with the glare of fluorescent lamps and tobacco smoke. As usual this late in the day, the main bar was crowded with red, brown, yellow, black faces all with their mouths open in talk and laughter. While he waited to be served, Leonard noted the faces he recognized.

One of the barmaids, looking somewhere between thirty and forty, but actually in her late twenties, came around the bottle cabinet from the main bar. "What would you like, Constable?" She wiped a hand across her forehead to push damp bleached hair out of her eyes.

"Swan middy with fish and chips. Got you hopping a bit tonight, eh, Shirley?"

"Like a tree frog in a frying pan. Be right out." She turned back to the main bar.

A figure settled a couple of stools away and called after her, "The same gargle for me, Shirley—ta!" Then to Leonard, "Hot's the word. Radio said Nullagine hit forty-eight degrees today. Set a bleedin' record for this late in the summer. It's that global warming, it is."

Leonard nodded agreement. "How you doing, Barry?"

"Keeping above water. Just." Beneath a fringe of tobacco-stained white mustache, the man's wrinkled lips squirted a stream of smoke. He ground out his cigarette in an overflowing ashtray.

Like much of Broome's longtime population, Barry had drifted into town because this is where the continent ended. For as long as Leonard could remember, the man worked odd jobs in the area, made enough to live on, and absorbed far more about Broome than Leonard would ever know. And that gave Leonard an idea. "Shout you for a game," he said.

White eyebrows lifting into the pale flesh above his hat line,

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Barry accepted in true Sand Groper fashion—bet first, question later: "Done. What are we playing?"

"Association. Trying to think of all the occupations in Broome that have to work on Sundays during the Wet. First one treed buys."

"Broome and environs, or just Broome?"

"Environs—ten kilometers. Any business. Go ahead."

"Environs. During the Wet. Sounds bugger-all silly to me, but it beats listening to the rain." Barry wagged his thumb at the dining room. "Restaurant staff."

"Petrol stations."

"Airport workers."

"Taxi drivers."

"Hotel staff."

They went quickly through the service industry jobs and moved to official duty stations: fire brigade, hospital, police. Shirley brought a second round and the bet became double or nothing. Pale blue eyes glinting as the contest sharpened, Barry grinned, "The Crocodile Park—Sunday's feeding day year round!"

That was one Leonard hadn't thought of. He searched for an occupation not yet named. "The deep water port—that's open on Sunday, right?"

Barry shook his head. "Not regularly in the Wet—and only if a ship comes in. Can't let you have that one."

True, there weren't many ships anymore. Leonard thought again.

"Give up, Constable?"

"Preacher—works every Sunday!"

"Bloody hell! All right: the bird sanctuary watchman."

"The what?"

"You heard me. It's over on Roebuck Bay and within ten kilometers. Have a ranger there everyday."

Shirley brought another round and it crossed Leonard's mind that what seemed at first a fun and lighthearted contest was turning bloody serious. Especially since he couldn't think of another suitable occupation. "Roadhouse staff."

"No—that comes under restaurant staff, and I named that right off. Give up yet?" Cheeks almost scarlet with drink and victory, Barry leaned forward. "Still got more!"

Leonard sighed. "All right—my shout. What have you got?"

He held up work-knotted fingers and counted them off. "Camel feeder. Damned beasts have to be fed Wet or Dry. Watchmen at the sewage treatment plant and at the oil tank farm—twenty-four seven. Meteorologist takes readings every day. Laundromat

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clerk—three of those in town, open Sundays. Chemist, one on call every weekend." Barry slapped the bar in triumph. "Thanks for the shout, Constable!"

Later, in the cramped motel room reserved by the District Police for Temporary Attachments (Junior Grade), Leonard went over Barry's answers. The man would skite all over town about winning his bet. But Leonard hoped that anyone listening to Barry's brag would hear it as a triumph over authority rather than an official interrogation, the subject of which might send someone running. And even though the drinks had cost Leonard his entire per diem for this trip, Barry had told him where to get started.

The answers he could not get by cell phone he sought in person. His first stop Tuesday morning was at the Fluffy-Lite Laundromat near the Short Street Carpark. A heavyset woman behind the counter folded clothes from a plastic basket onto a sheet of wrapping paper as she kept an eye on several humming machines. "No, Constable. Manager's the same every weekend—Sarah Klein. Saturday and Sunday both." The story was similar at the two other laundromats.

At the aerodrome, staff either had regular duty every weekend with weekdays off, or rotated once a month. Neither pattern fit the one Leonard looked for. The two camel safaris and the crocodile park reduced help during the Wet—"Don't make enough to pay an extra hand, weekend or weekday. Do it all meself, mate." The Bird Observatory was manned by Shire Rangers, who rotated Saturday and Sunday watches among half a dozen staff, though the schedule was flexible. Leonard put a question mark behind that entry. Fortunately, many shops and services were closed on weekends during the Wet because of few tourists. Still, after telephoning or talking with taxi dispatchers, the managers of half a dozen hotels, operators of the several car hire businesses, the oil tank farm, the sewage plant director, and the hospital's personnel director, he ended up with two men and one woman who could fit the pattern: a maintenance worker at the Mangrove Hotel, a taxi driver, and a clerk at the hospital's Emergency Department. He would have to interview each person, but already the day was half gone and Senior Sergeant Dougald waited.

When he entered the station, the S. S. speared him with an angry glare. "Don't you believe in reporting to morning muster, Smith?"

"Thought I had some time off for working the weekend, Senior Sergeant."

"You have time off if I give you time off! And in my shire, you request time off through proper channels, is that understood?"

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"Yessir. Sorry, sir."

"Sorry be damned. Get over to hospital and take Edgar Karenji's statement. If he's been discharged, you find him!"

"He won't be discharged yet."

"How do you know?"

"He's on seventy-two hour hold—due out tomorrow." Leonard, relieved to be escaping, smiled. "Ward clerk told me last night."

The sergeant's voice chased after him. "I want his statement this afternoon, not next week!"

It did not take long. Edgar winced as he shifted beneath the sheet on the hard mattress. His eyes avoided Leonard and focused on the plastic cup of green jelly that sat beside his empty lunch dishes on the bed tray. "I didn't see it happen."

"You didn't see it happen? You were there!"

"Yeah, I was there. Wouldn't've got cut, otherwise. You think I'd be there if I saw it coming? Didn't see it."

"Who else besides your brother was with you?"

A shrug, a wince, an evasion: "Don't know. Too drunk to know."

"Was Daisy Williams there?"

He shook his head. "No."

"But she gave you blokes money to get drunk."

"Yeah. She's all right People. Not like some of these other ones—claim to be People and don't even look at you."

"Okay, read this and sign." Leonard held the clipboard while the man scrawled his name under the few sentences. He would have been surprised if Edgar had named Albert as his assailant. The score between the brothers would be settled later, and without the involvement of mistrusted police. Maybe it would be via an apology or a gift from Albert. More likely, Leonard knew, both would shrug and file it under "drunk time," and then, when alcohol once again twisted their minds, Edgar would recall and lunge into bloody revenge.

Leonard checked his watch. He had time for some interviews.

The Mangrove Hotel overlooked Roebuck Bay. The manager looked over Leonard and wondered why the police wanted to talk to one of his employees. "Just background on another investigation, sir. Nothing at all to be concerned about."

Howard Benjamin, in his forties, squinted through the smoke of a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. "You want to see me, Constable?"

"Just need to know your whereabouts this past weekend, Mr. Benjamin."

The man's dark face became a mask. "Why?"

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"Might help with a case I'm working on. Do you know Daisy Williams?"

"Miss Daisy?"

"Yes."

"See her around and about. What kind of case?"

"Trespassing. Can you tell me where you were Saturday and Sunday?"

"Around town. And I bloody well wasn't trespassing anywhere."

"I don't think this involves you, Mr. Benjamin. But maybe someone you saw."

A cautious curiosity replaced defensiveness. "Where at?"

"Near Cape Latrille."

"Up the Manari Road in the Wet? Man, I got no reason to go there in the Dry, let alone in the bleeding Wet! I been here the whole weekend. Saturday, I had a few drinks at the Rowie and watched footy. Sunday, I messed about the house, then took the wife and kids out for a bite—you can ask them if you think you need to."

Leonard's next interview was off Djaigween Road on a small dirt spur leading to a parking lot and taxi office. Kumar Banerjee was waiting for him.

"Yes, Constable, it was my weekend off." The slender man's white smile held something of apology and he shrugged. "Almost every weekend is off, in the Wet."

"Every weekend?"

He nodded, straight glossy hair catching the fluorescent light overhead. "Supposed to work every other weekend, but now no work. We make up for it in the Dry. But in the Wet, not so much airplanes coming in, not so much people going to hotels."

"So you were home this past weekend?"

"Oh yes. With my family." He smiled widely. "It was my oldest boy's twelfth birthday. We had a party and watched Bollywood films."

The hospital personnel officer had earlier told Leonard on the telephone that the only staff regularly alternating weekend duties were ward clerks in the Emergency Department. Like the hotel manager, he was worried. "Is there something we should be aware of, Constable?"

"No, no—routine interview. She may or may not be a witness to an event, that's all. "

A plain woman, perhaps thirty, dark hair bobbed for efficiency, looked up from her computer screen. The small nameplate on her desk said "R. W. Elder." "Yes, I'm Roberta Elder. Why?" With a wide

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smile, Leonard said he just needed to ask a few questions. Yes, she alternated working weekends with the other clerk, Linda Pataki. Yes, she had been off this last Saturday and Sunday. She spent the time painting her living room and bedroom. She lived alone. No, she did not know a Daisy Williams.

Leonard nodded and thanked the woman and then sat in his Toyota, half-listening to the rain on the metal roof while he thought. After a while, he used his cell phone to make a call, asking a few questions, listening intently to the replies. Then he made a shorter, second call to Perth. He checked his watch, sighed, and waited for the end of the hospital's day shift.

The woman paused in the rear entry to open her umbrella before walking quickly into the parking lot.

"Mrs. Elder?"

She looked around. "Yes?"

"Constable Smith again. I have a few more questions."

"But—"

"May I buy you a coffee? Captain Murphy's is just around the corner."

The woman stared at him, eyes wide.

"It would be better than going to the police station to talk."

The eyes blinked and she nodded.

They sat at a quiet table away from the bar. Leonard ordered a stubby, Mrs. Elder a coffee. He smiled at the nervous woman. "You do know Daisy Williams, don't you?"

Holding the cup in both hands, she said nothing. The black liquid quivered.

"You go out to her home when you know she won't be there, because you've left money for her to get drunk. Every other weekend—the weekends you have off."

She did not move. Leonard was reminded of a wallaby caught in the headlights of an approaching car. "You divorced John Elder three years ago in Perth, is that right?"

She nodded.

"Your maiden name is Wignall. Roberta Wignall Elder."

Finally, "Yes."

"You began working at the hospital six months ago. Is that when you came to Broome?"

"Yes."

"What is it you're looking for at Wignall Station?"

Her shoulders rose and fell on a deep breath and she sipped at the coffee. "Papers. They show that the station was bought and paid for by Rupert Wignall in 1951. He was my great-uncle."

"But he was a squatter."

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A twist of irritation crossed her face. "That's a lie! There are papers. The bill of sale is hidden at the station house."

"Any change of title would have been filed."

A shake of her head. "He never filed. He was going to. He just never got around to it, and then it was too late." She set the cup down loudly on its saucer. "He paid money for that land!"

Most squatters didn't—they simply took. And any money paid, Leonard guessed, would have been far less than the value of the land, even that long ago. "Has anyone else in the Wignall clan looked for the bill of sale?"

Her voice lost its defiance. "No."

"Why now? Why you?"

"Because the station's worth money I can damn well use! Money that belongs to me!"

"How much?"

Another deep breath. "A lot. Broome's growing. A lot of people want land to build hotels and resorts on, and they'll pay for it. Pay a fortune for that land."

Leonard remembered the beach and the palm grove surrounding Daisy's home. Mrs. Elder was right: It would be a beautiful site for a resort. But it was not hers. Leonard explained that even if there were a lost bill of sale, it had not been legally filed, and such a claim would at best only complicate any sale of the property. As he spoke, he saw the woman's shoulders sink as if losing strength.

"I at least deserve something." He scarcely heard her whisper. "My uncle settled it, he built it. It was stolen from him."

"But it was taken from the Aboriginal owners. And you've found nothing to say otherwise. You have no claim at all to that property."

She stared into her cup again. "You sound like the bloody judge, the bastard that gave half my life savings to my ex."

"It was returned to the people your uncle took it from."

"He bought it!"

"But you have no proof of that." He studied her face. So this is what it came down to: sell the stolen land, take the money, and run. Bring in more hotels, more tourists, more restaurants that brought service jobs for the Aboriginals but would not welcome them at a table. "You can be penalized for trespass and for damage to the property. And enticing Daisy Williams to get drunk is a violation of the Aboriginal Protection Act." He hoped there was such an act. It sounded good, anyway. "Do you know that you could face prison?" He again waited until, still staring into her coffee, she nodded. "Stop bringing money so Daisy Williams can get drunk. Stop damaging her house and frightening the woman. I

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will tell her about you, and if anything ever happens again, I will know who to look for. Is that clear?"

"I didn't mean to frighten anyone."

"It will stop right now!"

"Yes."

She did not drink any more coffee. Leonard called for the bill and escorted her to her car. After one more warning, he watched her drive away into the gloomy Wet. Then he headed for the police station.

S. S. Dougald looked up as Leonard entered. "What's this I hear you're asking questions around town? What the bloody hell are you up to, Constable?"

"Looking into an Aboriginal matter, Senior Sergeant. It didn't turn out to be anything worth writing up."

"From now on, you bloody well inform me of all matters—Aboriginal or not—that take your official time. And you write it up. We are required to keep records of any and all complaints as well as our activities. In my shire you will comply with proper procedures!"

"Yessir. Were my reports satisfactory, Senior Sergeant?"

The grayhaired man grunted. "At least you can do that much." He pulled a slip of paper from one of the slots of his inbox. "Argyle Police have asked for you. Something at the Warmun Aboriginal Community. Don't know why the hell they want somebody who doesn't know proper procedures."

ALC Smith stifled his smile. "I'll be on my way then, sir," he said; and saluted smartly.

In the station parking lot, Leonard checked the back of the Toyota for his emergency gear: swag, cooking pot, tarp, water bags, tools, and tinned dog. The Senior Sergeant could have the proper procedures. Leonard knew his mission from long-ago times: shadow crimes called for shadow procedures.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The author thanks Terry Thornett for his research.*

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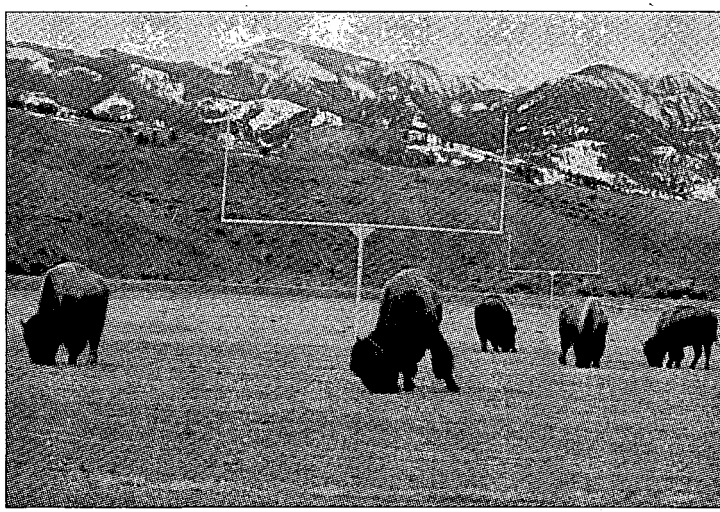
Mysterious Photograph



Tom Murphy/National Geographic/Getty Images

Where the Buffalo Roam

We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "June Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the December Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

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Breathing a Fine Stone Mist

ROBERT GRAY

When she arrives at work, the letter is still on her desk. Emma has never received personal mail from the main office in Boston before. That the envelope bears no postage is worrisome. Somebody came all the way to Vermont and stopped by her little office but didn't have the courage to stay and face her.

She taps the envelope against the desktop, then tears off one end. She pulls out a single sheet of paper and unfolds it—a form letter, with her name Emma Parker scrawled in after "Dear."

The letter is brief. "Due to unforeseen economic challenges," it begins, then cites "a marked downturn in both the national economy and Vermont tourist traffic during these uncertain times," along with "other key factors" as the basis for the recent "extremely difficult and painful" decision by the board of directors to "cease all operations, both ongoing and proposed," for the MillWorks Project as of a date that is less than a month away. The board "deeply regrets any inconvenience this decision will cause among its valued associates, and sincerely wishes all of you the very best of luck in the future. The board will always be deeply grateful for your loyalty, your fine work, and for your understanding of the current, extremely unfortunate situation."

Cordially . . .

The room spins. Emma sits, tries to think clearly, tries to breathe, fails at both for a moment, then catches some air and places the letter down on the desk. She has a tour beginning within minutes, but suddenly she's forgotten what to tell them, the words erased from her memory and replaced by all these new, awful words—*uncertain, difficult, cease, inconvenience, unfortunate*. She can't even summon the strength to hope, to pretend that there has been a mistake. The letter looks and reads like truth. Everything ends today.

It's her husband's fault. She knows he's behind this somehow, though it seems impossible. He's punishing her for what she's done, for what she's become; punishing her again. He never wanted her

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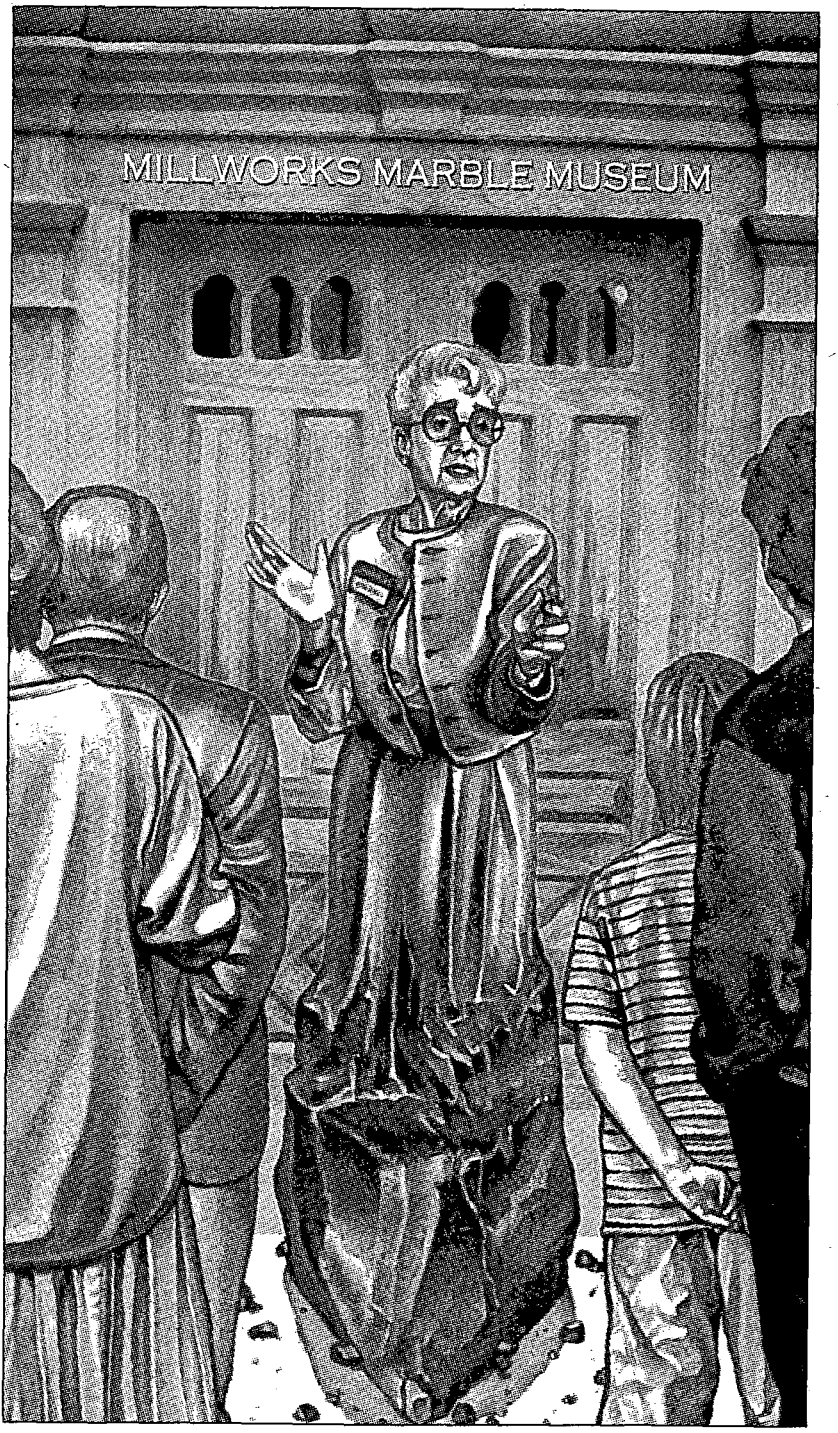

Ron Chironna

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here in the first place, and finally he's gotten his way. The son of a bitch, she thinks, even though she would never say this aloud. No one in Millbridge would believe her capable of saying such a thing. The son of a bitch.

She can't bear the thought of changing again. Emma loves being a docent. She even likes saying the word to herself—*docent, docent, docent*. The out-of-state developers who've been renovating the old marble mill brought that word with them from Boston, just as the Irish and the Polish and the Italians had carried their words here in earlier times.

Emma first saw the classified ad in the local paper three years ago: "Wanted: one full-time docent." She had to look it up in the dictionary: "A knowledgeable guide, particularly one who conducts visitors through a museum and delivers a commentary on exhibitions." Above all, she loves the notion of being a docent every time somebody in town asks, "What are you up to these days, Emma?"

"I'm a docent at the MillWorks Marble Museum," she replies. Since she began working here, she has noticed how much more interesting and even enjoyable life is; the work has put a spring in her step and a lilt in her voice that just weren't there before, ever. After all those years of saying "housewife" or "wife and mother," it has felt awfully good to have a new answer to that annoying and demeaning question. But now she will lose her answer. Now she will be "Bill's wife" again, and that is no pleasure at all.

How had she ever summoned the nerve to apply for this job in the first place? She's still not sure. She considered a hundred sensible reasons not to apply, but in the end she couldn't stop herself. Just getting out of the house, away from Bill, seemed like the best reason. Ever since his retirement twenty years ago, he'd haunted their house more than a real ghost ever would have. And for the past eight years he'd been confined to a wheelchair, so he was mad every time she went out the door for any reason, as if her two good legs were an insult or a rebellion or something.

Emma's friends teased her at first about this *docent* business, and Bill, who thought she was crazy to want to do this, said it was just "a high-falutin' way of saying tour guide, like calling a garbage collector a sanitation engineer."

When she told him later what the salary would be—she should have kept that to herself—he said she should turn them down; said if they were going to give her a fancy French title they should at least pay her more than a supermarket cashier.

"We got enough money, ain't we?" he asked her the day they actually offered her the job.

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"It's not about money," she replied.

"Why do you want to work anyway?" he growled. "You're seventy-five years old, goddamn it."

"Seventy-three. I can do this job. I can still walk and talk."

"What am *I* supposed to do?" He was practically spinning circles in his wheelchair, that old anger welling up just like it used to, but with no place to spend itself, least of all on her. Not anymore.

"What are you supposed to do about what?" she asked calmly.

This stumped him, but only for a second. "About lunch." It was pathetic, but the best he could do under pressure. In fact, he relied on her for a lot more than lunch—she was his full-time nurse, and those wages were worse than what she'd be getting from the museum.

"Eat," she snapped, surprising herself. His face betrayed a flutter of shock. He stormed away without another word, and that was how her career began, like busting a bottle of champagne against a ship. Jealous was what he was, just plain old jealous.

There was a time when she would have listened to him, let him bully her. Instead, she didn't even fight with him about it, not really, or at least not in the old way, with shouting and tears and threats. She simply waited him out, did what she wanted to do, and let him stew about it. She took care of all his needs, came home on her lunch hour, and showed him she could handle both worlds, his and hers. She didn't even talk to him about it after a while. She just let it happen. She'd learned how to be stubborn too.

What would he say now if she told him about the museum closing? He'd be happy about it, she's sure.

Teach you a lesson, he'd say.

What lesson?

Not to hope.

"The original settlers in the Millbridge area were mostly English and came from Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire," Emma says. The words, when she needs them, come without effort, like a prayer. "The Irish arrived by the mid nineteenth century, built the railroads, and stayed on to work in the quarries and shops of the new marble industry."

Even by the marble museum's modest standards, this is a small group. A young family of four trails behind her, followed by an attentive couple about Emma's age, mid seventies, dressed for sport in pale yellow sweatsuits and dazzling white sneakers. Emma realizes that her smart blue skirt and jacket and crisply starched white blouse probably seem old fashioned and school-

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marmish to all of them, but she doesn't mind. It feels good to dress up. For too many years she mended her housedresses again and again because every nickel Bill earned at the mill went to keep their daughter out of rags and put food on the table.

"By the end of the nineteenth century, more than a hundred commercial varieties of marble were being quarried in Vermont," she continues as she leads her party along a corridor. Red letters stenciled on the whitewashed walls of the corridor announce the next exhibit: *The Story of Marble: From the Precambrian Period to Contemporary Times*.

Emma has already shown them, from the vantage point of a custom-built, second-story balcony, the immense, abandoned interior of the mill building attached to the museum. It's one of a dozen such ghost buildings that were once loud, crowded, and dusty. What her group saw, however, was a clean, spacious cement floor, a couple of long-silenced gang saws, several polishing machines, and a few A-frame pallets holding marble slabs.

After seeing the shop floor, the group watched a grainy, fifteen minute condensed history of the Millbridge Marble Company. Now, as they enter the history room, Emma continues her talk: "By 1908, the company had five thousand employees. Interpreters were sent to Ellis Island to recruit immigrants. In 1923, nearly fifty gang saws in one Millbridge mill operated twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. During a strike in the mid 1860s, the company brought in French-Canadian workers to replace the evicted Irish. In 1871, the company imported several dozen Swedes, but few of them remained. In 1886, a large number of Italians were brought over by the company, and in the early 1890s Polanders began arriving. In this room you will see how and why Vermont became their destination and their future."

"What's Polanders?" asks one of the children, a thin girl with straight blond hair. She looks up at Emma with bright, curious, blue eyes.

"Immigrants from Poland, sweetie," her father says. "People came from all over the world to work in America. It was their dream." He is gravely overweight. His wife is tiny and quiet.

Emma steps aside with practiced grace and gently waves her right arm through the air as an invitation. "I'll give you some time to look around here before we continue on to the Marbles of the World Hall."

The kids burst into the spacious room. Their parents follow, and all four scatter among the exhibits as if chronological order were just an old-fashioned notion. The older couple, by contrast, moves directly to the first numbered exhibit to study a cutaway of the

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earth's surface during the Precambrian era. The man points and his wife nods. On the other side of the room, the little boy whispers to his mother, then tugs at her sleeve when she ignores him. Finally, she leans down to listen.

"Ask the docent," she says.

He looks at Emma but doesn't speak.

"Could you show him where the bathroom is, ma'am?" the mother asks.

"Of course," Emma replies, smiling. The boy responds to her smile, as children often do.

She will miss the children. She will miss everything. She has spent three years talking about change as it relates to the earth and to marble and to the business of bringing stone to market. Now that she faces change herself, she realizes that knowing about it is not the same as feeling its effects.

Emma loves telling tourists about the marble industry in Millbridge. She feels like an actress in a play. If there's one thing she knows, it's this damn marble mill, where all of the men in her family and all of the men in Bill's family spent their working lives. Her father worked a gang saw, with its long steel blades swinging back and forth, slicing, with the help of an abrasive slurry of sand and water, through the immense marble blocks. It took hours to work through a single block. A fine stone mist suffused the air around the workers. That was what they breathed all day. At night, when her father came home, gray mud covered him from head to toe, and he looked like a statue.

She wasn't the least bit surprised when she discovered, during her first training session, that one of the blown-up, black-and-white photographs on the wall at the museum pictured her father, his hands on his hips, looking disgusted, that impatient scowl Emma remembers so well, as he watched his saw blades slice through stone in a pendulum swing as relentless as nature.

She's not vain about her accumulated knowledge. She realizes that a lot of people her age in Millbridge could probably do this job. Marble flows through their veins too. Well, the men wouldn't be good at it. They couldn't control their foul mouths, and she can't imagine them sticking to the script; the poor tourists would have to listen to one boring story about the good old days after another. She's constantly amazed by the way the men, including her Bill, could hate the marble company for all those years and then, after it was taken away from them, talk about it like the place had been paradise itself. No, it was definitely best to keep the men away from the tourists.

The little boy drops a candy wrapper on the floor. Emma doesn't

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want to scold. It's not her style, and the museum discourages it, believing that scolding tourists is bad for business. Instead, she waits until the child moves along, and then scoops up his litter, crumpling it into a tight ball. She doesn't like to see her museum, her second home, abused. She loves the place, loves the sheer glorious wasted space of it all. She loves the whitewashed walls and the tall banks of factory windows, through which sunlight pours because the panes are no longer coated with marble dust. Everything here is so bright and clean now.

Except when she is leading a tour group, Emma is often left on her own. The girls they hire to work in the gift shop never stay for long and seldom have much to say to her, so she wanders the halls even when she doesn't have a group. Sometimes she finds a quiet place to sit and read.

Emma glances at her watch: eleven fifteen. They're behind schedule. She needs to be home for lunch by noon. She'll have to cut a few corners to get this group through before then. She scans the room, sees the father examining a scale-model reproduction of an early steam drill. This is the second time he's been there, which is a good sign. He's ready to move on.

"If you'll follow me, we'll continue our tour in the Marbles of the World Hall. There you will see for yourself the vast array of colors and textures this extraordinary stone comes in, depending upon where it has been quarried. If you would . . . Excuse me. Please come this way now."

The children race toward her, stopping at the last possible second, their shoes squeaking on the polished wood. They laugh. She smiles. The older couple, who only managed to get halfway through the numbered displays, obediently moves toward her as well; the kids' mother trails just behind. Only the husband hesitates. Clearly, Emma thinks, he is used to giving orders, not taking them.

"Wow!" cries the little boy as they approach the brilliant, sunlit expanse of the exhibition hall. He starts to run ahead.

"Careful, champ," yells his father. "Wait for us."

Emma picks up the thread of her talk again. "The marble slabs you are about to see range from Parian marble, a semitranslucent stone quarried in Greece and popular among sculptors for its whiteness, to Belgian Black, which smells like rotten eggs when it is cut." As usual, the children snicker when she says this.

On her way home for lunch, Emma drives down Pine Street past the Catholic church. As the spire looms, she feels an urge to stop, go inside, and pray . . . for what? Can she pray for a museum? Can

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she pray for her own selfish needs? Her happiness? Maybe she should at least make a sign of the cross as she drives by. She doesn't, though, and soon the church shrinks in her rearview mirror. Just before it disappears altogether, she whispers, "Please, God." Too early to say, "Rest in peace."

She stands on the porch of her house, their house, Bill's house. Although it's only a little after noon, dark autumn clouds have given to afternoon a darkness like twilight. She notices that there are lights on in every room. Bill hates the dark, but he hates high electric bills more.

Through the living room window Emma can see marble everywhere—coffee and end tables, lamps and ashtrays, all set against the pale blue tint of the furniture fabric, wall paint, carpeting, and curtains. On the fireplace mantel, family photos mix with bowling trophies and knickknacks. From this distance, they could be pictures of anybody; she can only recognize them because she already knows who they are.

She could lead one of her tour groups through this house, point out marble artifacts in almost every corner, take them out to the TV room where Bill, an authentic retired marble worker, slumps in his favorite chair, the television screen shifting from one program to the next with the reliability of a clock.

She thinks about the way young people talk about needing their space these days. When Bill first retired, the walls of their little house suddenly boxed her in. He was never a homebody when he worked. On his days off he fished and hunted, and many nights he'd go to the Legion or to the Bowlerama. In retirement, he went out less and less over the years, stopped visiting his old buddies, and eventually they died or stopped visiting too. He hasn't done anything for a long time. He sits and waits for her. That's his job.

Emma slips quietly inside. In the TV room she stands beside the chair where Bill's heavy body sprawls, surrounded by objects that tell the simple story of his days—dirty coffee mugs lined up on his tray, along with an open, half empty bag of potato chips, an overflowing ashtray, a crumpled pack of Marlboros, and a breakfast plate that once held scrambled eggs and toast.

The television is on, but soundless. Three pretty young women sit on plush furniture in a coffee shop, laughing at a pair of young men who punch each other in the shoulder, then wince with pain and fall to the floor.

"The museum is going to close, Bill," she whispers. "I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm so . . ." She touches his shoulder, gently at first, then with a sharp poke.

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They don't have conversations, only confrontations. Last month, for example, she cooked at the Senior Center and he got on her case about that. She'd just come home from a long day at the museum, and the minute she walked in the house, he yelled, "Supper ready?" as he came back to consciousness at the sound of the front door slamming shut. His voice was frail but still had that threatening edge she had always feared. It twisted something inside her every time.

Emma did not answer him; she headed for the stairs. She had a headache. Her legs were sore and tired. Her everything was sore and tired.

"Supper ready?" his gravelly voice echoed again through the house. "What're we havin'?"

She hated shouting, but from the bottom of the stairs, she called back to him. "I told you this morning. It's Thursday. I have to help cook at the Center tonight. If you're interested, we're having chicken and biscuits."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"You're welcome to join us. You know that. You love chicken and biscuits." Slowly she climbed the stairs.

"It ain't the food." Bill hated the senior center, which he called a "dump full of geezers learnin' to knit." Actually, she knew he didn't like people seeing him in the wheelchair, especially the part where she had to help him get in and out of their car.

Emma knew there was little point in arguing. She didn't want to fight. She didn't even want him to come with her, truth be told. She took a deep breath at the top of the stairs, trying to calm herself. She shut him out by concentrating on something she'd read that afternoon in a book she borrowed from the library. She'd already memorized it:

"Champlain Black marble comes from one of the oldest quarries in the United States. The rich black of this stone is contrasted by flecks of fossilized organisms. The quarry is an ancient sea bed, more than four hundred fifty million years old. This stone has been used in the construction of many well-known buildings, including Radio City Music Hall and the Brooklyn Bridge." She felt confident enough to add it to her script.

Emma entered her bedroom and chose an outfit, something nice but practical, since she would be in the kitchen and not at a fancy ball. Bill yelled again, but she couldn't make out a word he said, so she didn't respond. She dressed quickly and touched up her face, wishing she had time to shower. She delayed leaving the bedroom, hoping that he'd lose interest and go back to his damned TV.

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Even at eighty-one, frail and withdrawn and crippled, hardly more than a shadow of the man she'd known all her life, Bill could intimidate her. She knew this had more to do with the person he once was, not the one he'd become, but her reaction was instinctive, honed from years spent trying to predict his moods and deflect his anger.

When she'd married him, he was thirty and she twenty-two, still living with her parents. He was a man of the world. He'd been to France and Germany during the war, and had come back to work in the quarries, a good job in those days. Bill was tough, like most of the quarrymen, and always had a short fuse. When they were young, he scared her sometimes. Although he hardly ever laid a hand on her—she was lucky compared to some of her friends—the things he'd say sometimes froze her heart.

Ready at last, Emma left the bedroom. At the top of the stairs, she saw Bill waiting for her below, his wheelchair positioned to block her way, its bulky frame making up for his frailty.

"I said, what am I supposed to do about supper?" His eyes were cold, his tone seething with rage.

"There's still some pork in the fridge," Emma said, descending slowly. She stood on the last stair, waiting for him to move aside. He scowled. He hadn't shaved for a few days, and his beard made him look even older and meaner. She wondered what she had ever seen in him, and almost laughed at the thought, so absurd under the circumstances.

For the first time that she could remember in a confrontation like this, he surrendered. Waving her off with disgust, he turned sharply and headed back toward the TV room, muttering some terribly unpleasant things about her, though none she hadn't heard before. A moment later, the volume was so high that the sound of canned laughter filled the house.

The afternoon is slow at the museum, as if the tourists all received a letter this morning, too: "Your visits will no longer be required. Thank you for . . ."

Whether it's the bad news or the lack of a sizable audience, Emma just can't keep her mind on her work. "The process of sawing marble by means of a toothless strip of metal and the liberal use of sand was the invention of a Vermonter—Isaac Parker, of Middlebury," she says, and knows the name is wrong the second it leaves her tongue.

"Was he an ancestor of yours?" asks a professorial type wearing a corduroy sport coat and blue jeans.

"Who?"

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"Isaac Parker." He jots the name down in a small notebook.

"Oh, no, did I say Parker? I meant Markham."

Emma is suddenly disoriented in the one place where she had come to feel oriented.

When the tour is over, she goes outside and strolls through the marble chip–covered parking lot, just to breathe some fresh air and to clear her mind. It almost works. A few minutes later, she walks beneath the museum's entrance arch—one immense marble block atop a pair of vertical blocks—and enters the building again. The place is nearly empty. She wanders through the quiet halls, fondly touching displays with her fingertips.

She enters her favorite room, the Marbles of the World Hall. As big as a gymnasium, it was originally the company's showroom. Marble, limestone, and a few granite panels are showcased vertically and bathed in abundant natural light streaming through the banks of small-paned windows high on the walls.

Emma walks down one of the narrow aisles, moving from slab to slab as if each were a separate canvas in an art museum. She loves the names: Verde Antique, Regal White Danby, Westland Green Veined Cream, Pico Green, Westland Cippolino, Neshobe Gray Clouded, Champlain Black, Mariposa Danby, Striped Brocadillo, Verdoso, Olivo. She will miss them all.

In a soft voice, Emma recites: "Extraneous substances introduced in minute quantities during formation created the colors, veining, clouds, mottling, and shadings in marble. The activity and movement of the earth's crust caused the wavelike or folded configuration of the veining. The limestone beds tilted up and folded, resulting in the characteristics of the marble. Veins appeared when cracks or sedimentary layers filled with minerals to become permanent characteristics as a result of metamorphism."

Standing before a slab of Best Light Cloud, she moves in close, observes crystals fleck in the changing afternoon light. Then she steps back, as she imagines people do in front of paintings at an art gallery, and the crystals become veins of soft color. She can sense her own blood rushing along its delicate arteries, and feels a connection with the stone.

Two hours later, shortly before closing time, she stands in the same spot and recites her script again; this time a dozen people form a semicircle around her. They listen, some intently, some just politely, but all look surprised when she suddenly falls silent and stares at the slab with intense concentration. No one seems willing to move or to speak.

Emma is not meditating; she is stunned. All of those facts and figures she has dutifully memorized and recited for three years

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about unimaginable lengths of time and immense forces beneath the earth's surface suddenly make sense in a new way, a way that almost renders her words meaningless. She doesn't dare move; afraid the thought will desert her if she even blinks.

Verde Antique, Regal White Danby, Westland Green Veined Cream, Pico Green—the names mean nothing. She's learned so much about marble, but knew nothing until now. This is so much deeper, a quarry, deeper still. She turns toward her group and smiles. Suddenly she has a new script, handed to her like Moses and his tablets, only this is not about "Thou Shalt . . ." or "Thou Shalt Not . . ."

"Flaws are an element of marble's makeup," she begins, "and part of what gives all these different marbles their unique beauty; there's a kind of purity in their impurity. I've read that this purity comes from metamorphism, but that's just a word, like docent." She pauses. No one moves. No one blinks. "The beauty comes from death, from the end of things. Champlain Black is loaded with fossils of creatures that once wandered as freely as we do. It is stone made from organic material. Living things created marble. Marble is a kind of living thing too. Everything is organic material that will die and return to the ground. Not just this town, but me, and my husband, and all of you nice people waiting patiently for me to say something sensible, something that will make you feel better."

The thought takes Emma's breath away. She has to sit for just a minute on a marble bench. She watches the sunlight alter the stone's surface again and again. She pictures her grandfather and her father and her husband underground, standing with other workers, dwarfed by the quarry walls. She sees them not as they look in the blown-up museum photos, but like those ancient drawings of the slaves who built the pyramids. Nothing changes. Everything changes. This frightens her even as it grants her a strange peace of mind.

Someone clears his throat, which brings Emma back.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I was thinking." She studies their faces, these innocent tourists who only want to learn a little bit about marble before moving on. They don't know anything. Tomorrow they will pick apples or buy maple syrup at a farm stand or maybe take a hike on the Long Trail. Eventually they will be fossils too, and maybe even marble. They need to know more than can be contained by these walls. This is not the whole story.

"Please follow me," she says curtly, like a stern first-grade teacher as she heads toward the far end of the building. Accustomed to obedience, they follow, though some appear concerned when she reaches the fire exit and presses firmly on the bar just below a sign

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warning that the alarm will sound if anyone does such a thing. The harsh buzz immediately echoes throughout the Marbles of the World Hall as Emma moves into the sun-drenched holding yard. Warily, the tour group joins her.

"This area was used to store marble that was ready for the finishing mill," she says in her best docent voice. The yard has only a scattering of weathered A-frame pallets and the odd slag pile. Thick weeds and vines cover everything.

Metamorphosis.

As they follow her brisk steps across the yard, the noise of the alarm gradually diminishes. "Although what you see here now is just a handful of rusted iron pallets and weeds, thirty years ago the sun's reflection off the marble could have blinded you, like the glare off fresh snow."

Emma reaches the far end of the property, where a rusted steel mesh fence encloses and protects nothing. Kids have forced a narrow opening at one corner. She hunches down and wedges herself through the gap, then stands on the other side, waiting. Again there is hesitation, but when two boys scoot through, the others follow.

She sets off down the sidewalk, indicating points of interest as they go.

"The entire business block here was once owned by the marble company. The only food store for miles was the company store. Employees commonly worked for no paycheck whatsoever, since the company often deducted rent, food, insurance, and other supplies from their wages."

A boy rides by on a bicycle, nearly ramming a parked car as he spins around to join the strange parade. Emma stops before a marble statue of a G.I. "This World War II memorial was commissioned by the town and erected here in 1951, even though the company had at first threatened to fire any man who enlisted."

She leads them across the street and they march toward Kapitan's Dash Mart, in front of which three men sit at a picnic table. One of them points toward Emma; another waves. "See those old men? All of them are retired marble workers. All of them were in the quarries with my husband when they were young. All of them cough too much. All of them drink too much. They thought the mills and quarries would kill them young, so they drowned themselves in booze and cigarettes. They've lived too long. Their kids left long ago—God knows where—just like mine did. The man in the middle? Stubby Cole? He once beat his wife so bad she had to go to the hospital for a week."

Two cars head across the marble bridge at a high rate of speed,

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as if racing, and everyone stops to watch them streak past. Both vehicles are full of sullen-looking boys, who sit low and wear baseball caps turned backward. The boys coolly ignore the odd assembly on the sidewalk, and in a moment the cars screech around a corner and disappear.

"See that marble bridge over there?" Emma asks, as if nothing happened. "Seven people have jumped to their deaths from it. All marble workers or their wives. Many, many people were not happy here." She shakes her head, looks down at the cracked pavement, then sets off at a brisk pace toward the bridge.

"That large house way up on the hill?" she says, pointing beyond the bridge to a weathered brick mansion that perches on a ledge. "That used to be the company hospital, where they treated workers for reduced rates, mostly so they could keep them out of the big hospital in Rutland and control the statistics regarding the number of patients and their diseases and injuries, which might have attracted unwanted negative attention to the company. Here's a statistic for you: At one time there were more bars per capita in Millbridge than any other town or city in the state."

Emma looks behind her. Half of her group has deserted and are now heading back toward the museum at a trot. The rest stand their ground, waiting for more.

"Now I will take you to my house, where another retired marble worker, Bill Parker, is at this moment sitting in front of his TV, on which God-knows-what is playing as he prepares to become a fossil in a limestone formation himself.

She pauses, then adds, "I've been adding ground marble to his food for a long time because everybody needs more calcium in their diet and it's probably not that dangerous, but it has destroyed his appetite over time. Ground marble, or calcium carbonate, can be used as an extender and sometimes the main ingredient in products like latex paint, antacids, and toothpaste. Marble didn't kill Bill Parker. I did. I fed him less and less. By the time he figured out what was happening, he was too weak to do anything about it. The prevailing colors of Vermont marble are white and blue; this is now also true of my husband."

That does it for her remaining audience. They back sheepishly away, as if pretending to follow her even as they leave. Someone mumbles, "Thank you." The boy on the bike also abandons her.

Emma walks on alone, heading for the marble bridge. She leans against the thick stone railing and looks down at the foaming water as it tumbles frenziedly around smooth boulders and then plummets over the falls.

We'll be fossils all right, she thinks. We'll be limestone. We'll be

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marble. I'm not the only one who's changing. Thousands of years from now, Bill will be an ashtray.

People. History. A bad joke.

She remembers reading that on April 14, 1730, Captain William Gates and a party of Iroquois guides beached their canoes about three hundred yards north of where she stands. Gates was the first white man to set foot in what would become Millbridge fifty years later. The Indians were here long before all that, of course, but even they were latecomers compared to the fossils embedded in the rocks all around her.

The rush of water makes Emma dizzy, but she stares deeply into it anyway. Gradually, her eyes adjust to the glare, and then, through the sparkling green and blue camouflage of the water, she sees the mottled surface of a white limestone streambed. She feels a light, cool spray on her face. She inhales the drops and thinks of her father sawing those huge blocks and breathing the stone mist.

Marble is a kind of living thing.

She understands this completely now.

She doesn't move, not a muscle, still as stone.

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

GP YCEPS DW ABP ZACLYZ. YPWPCAPS YLUOZ CUS NUVENZ HYVDOBA UV YPWQJ, HDA QLZAPULUO EQVZPQJ L EVDQS SLZALUODLZB C BVQQVG OYVCU EVTLUO RYVT GLABLU.

—COCABC EBYLZALP

CIPHER: _

ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Solution on page 127

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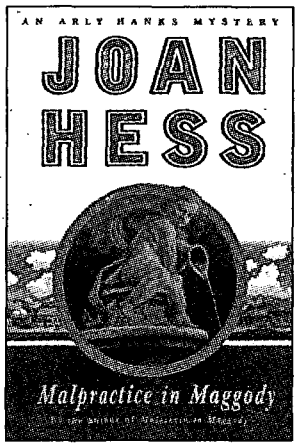
BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

Murder can be harsh, but writers of cosies find ways to leaven the unpleasantness with humor, quirkiness, and charm. Joan Hess, Gillian Roberts, and newcomer Jane Tesh are among the writers adept at mixing murder, mischief, mayhem, and the occasionally meaningful message, serving up delightful concoctions that cut the harshness with hilarity.

Joan Hess has been spinning yarns about the Ozark inhabitants of the little town of Maggody, Arkansas ("population 755 or thereabouts") for almost twenty years. She describes them with a mixture of affection and amusement that recognizes their core strengths and decency while poking fun at their foibles.

The pivotal character in these romps is Sheriff Arly Hanks, who has the rare distinction of having escaped Maggody once, and then returned.



As the fifteenth book in the series, MALPRACTICE IN MAGGODY (Simon & Schuster, $23), gets underway, the town's overactive rumor mill is working at breakneck speed. The big news is the closing of the county old folks home and an unusual amount of activity at that site, with an expensive limousine showing up followed by heavy construction equipment.

In no time, people are postulating a number of horrors, including an "insane asylum for criminals and perverts." Instead, what they get is The Stonebridge Foundation, an exclusive, restricted rehab facility staffed by a crew of bizarre and avaricious professionals and non–English speaking support staff.

This becomes a recipe for hilarious mayhem and murder as Stonebridge's first unwilling but paying clients begin to arrive: a famous Dr. Shelby Dibbins, author of bestselling diet books who weighs in at over four hundred pounds; Toby Mann, a star quarterback whose penchant for violent physical contact extends to the bedroom; Alexandra Swayze, a U.S. senator with a serious addiction to pain pills; and Dawn Dartmouth, a child actress who

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has slid into adulthood with diminishing credits and a growing fondness for alcohol and cocaine.

Meanwhile, the good folk of Maggody are responding to this invasion of "foreigners" (some of whom are not only foreigners but also—gasp!—Catholics) by taking precautions such as arming themselves against the invaders. Chaos and murder ensue until law, if not order, is restored, and the little town of Maggody falls back into its normal somnolence—that is, until Joan Hess chooses to visit some new disaster upon it.

Gillian Roberts (a k a Judith Greber) and her Philadelphia schoolteacher–sleuth Amanda Pepper have a whole different class of confusions and convulsions to explore in A HOLE IN JUAN (Ballantine, $23.95), the thirteenth entry in this award-winning series.

Working with the sometimes troubled and troublesome students at Philly Prep is rewarding and often challenging. Amanda senses serious undercurrents at the school as Halloween and "Mischief Night" approach. Fellow teacher, Juan Angel Reyes, a dapper but stiff science teacher, is already complaining about an escalating series of pranks. Amanda becomes victim of what may or may not be a prank when a test is stolen and copied before it can be given, then her attendance book disappears. The pranks continue until one yields nearly fatal results, and Amanda begins to receive veiled warnings of more trouble yet to come. Meanwhile, one of Amanda's more successful projects at school, a poetry reading, has attracted the censorious wrath of principal Maurice Havermeyer. The results are a battle of conscience for Amanda and a rebellion by her students.

Amanda also faces challenges on the homefront, where she and P.I. husband C. K. Mackenzie are surrogate parents for his sixteen-year-old nephew Pip, a dropout transplant from Iowa who is trying to recover from adolescent heartbreak.

Roberts is adept at depicting Amanda's array of students with their bewildering combinations of arrogance and angst, confusions and certainties, enthusiasms and ennui. She never resorts to stereotypes or easy answers as Amanda and her students confront the problems presented by a post-Columbine, post-9/11 world. Written with humor and compassion, Robert's latest tackles serious issues with insight and understanding as Amanda, with assists from both Pip and Mackenzie, struggles to prevent tragedy from overtaking Philly Prep.

Jane Tesh's well-written and stylish debut, A CASE OF IMAGINATION (Poisoned Pen, $22.95), features a former child and adult beauty contestant who opens a detective agency in Parkland, North Carolina.

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Tesh thrusts her heroine, Madeline Maclin, into the midst of a small-town beauty pageant beset by jealousies, connivings, radical protesters, and unexplained, but apparently malicious, accidents. When one of the contestants is murdered, the case takes on another tone altogether.

Add to the plot an obnoxious competitor (private eye Reid Kent) and a rival (Olivia Decker) for the affections of her best friend Jerry.

Jerry is a kind of loveable doofus who has turned his back on the family fortune. He also fancies himself a psychic, though his psychic abilities are not strong enough for him to sense Madeline's desire to be more than a friend. But while Jerry dreams of turning his newly acquired home into a place for psychic readings, Olivia sees it as a successful bed and breakfast.

Tesh captures the small town flavor nicely, and her minor characters are convincingly sketched with brevity and clarity.

In a tale that won't spare the details, however savage or meticulous, THE MERCY SEAT (Pegasus Books, $25) introduces British novelist Martyn Waites.

Waites's sixth novel, but the first to be published in the U.S., introduces Joe Donovan, a journalist turned recluse who struggles to come to terms with his own sordid past. When a teenage hustler turns up a minidisc player that contains clues to a headline-grabbing missing persons case, he seeks out Donovan, the only man named on the tape. In unraveling the truth and his unwitting link to the mysterious recording, Donovan finds himself revisiting his past while running for his life. In this complexly plotted narrative, multiple story arcs are resolved in an all-encompassing end. The book opens on a man bound and panicked in the "mercy seat," an appellation for the torture used by the Soviet army to enforce control during the break up of the Eastern bloc in the early 1990s, and ends with a tall body count of saints and sinners alike.

Waites's staccato prose drives the action with white-knuckle suspense, making for a breathless read that entices from page one. Set in the seedy underbelly of modern New Castle, England, a playground for crooked cops, jewel-toothed assassins, drug-addled rent boys, their grotesque pimps and closeted jacks, *The Mercy Seat* is a portrait of filth, fear, and frenzy, unrelenting in its delivery and unapologetic for its raw-edged depiction of crime and corruption.

—*Nicole K. Sia*

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DEATH AT DELPHI

MARIANNE WILSKI STRONG

The innkeeper was a Thessalian by the name of Tedar, and not so fond of us Athenians. The inn was slightly seedy, but Tedar gave us one of the better rooms. It was not my good Athenian coins that made him generous, nor my identity. When I announced that I was Kleides of Athens, I heard whispers of "Sophist" go round the tavern room. My fame as a treatise writer, a companion and sometimes friendly rival of Socrates, and the man whom Pericles of Athens called upon to investigate murders that threatened our proud city had obviously spread to Mount Parnassus and Delphi. But fame, which we Greeks strive for, proved of little interest to this burly innkeeper.

However, once he cast his eye on my mistress Selkine's slender, tall body, the room was ours. Not that Selkine wasn't wearing her full chiton, a lovely white flowing tunic with a red hem, and her cloak, but even with all that, she is as graceful as the goddess Artemis, that is, if you believe in the gods. These days, many of us do not, or at least, we are skeptical. Perhaps, as some Athenians claim, we Sophists with our ideas of moral relativity and ethics based on humans and the city rather than divine truths have corrupted our youth. It does worry me.

But in the inn on this sunny spring day at the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, it was Selkine who worried me. She had insisted on coming to consult the oracle. She refused to say what her question was to be, but I feared that she was considering marrying her wealthy lover. He had once given her a pair of gold earrings of delicate beadwork. She had worn them for a while, then put them aside. Lately, she'd started to wear them again. She was thirty-two now, myself forty-one, and I began to detect that she wanted marriage and children. I, of course, was still hopelessly in love with the beautiful and intelligent Aspasia, Pericles' mistress and mother of his two sons. Still, Selkine was beautiful, and I did not want to lose her. So I was facing a dilemma. Marry her or lose her. Would marriage limit my life? Not my political life, certainly. No Athenian man limited his political life for family life. But I often found

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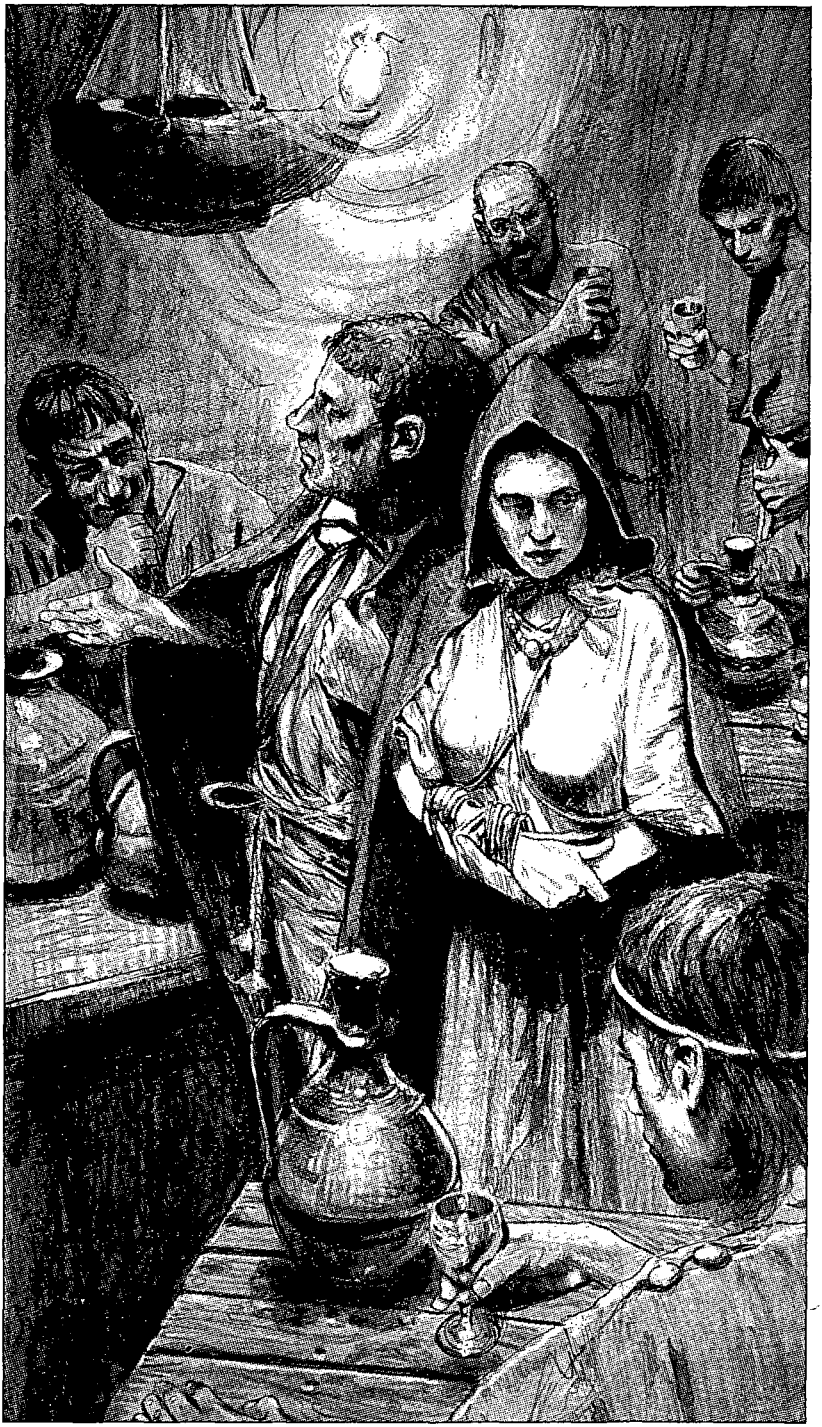

Joel Spector

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myself in dangerous situations, investigating homicides. Would Selkine be able to handle that? Would she object once we had children? I didn't know. Or, perhaps, I was more worried about how much of a burden a wife and children would be to me.

It was all of these questions, and a strong dose of vanity no doubt, that clouded my usual keen observations and made me miss the undercurrent of hostility that lurked in the whispers in the tavern when Selkine and I arrived.

I didn't miss the lust in the innkeeper's eyes, though, or the interest several men showed in Selkine. They all knew that aristocratic Athenian women stayed close to home and that only a high class hetaera, which Selkine's earrings, expensive linen chiton, and lustrous dark curls over her shoulders announced her to be, would have traveled openly. I could see the men calculating just how much Selkine might charge for her favors. Most of them quickly realized that she could well afford to pick and choose her lovers. So they lost interest, though they may well have wondered why she had chosen me.

One man with short, badly cut hair and a rough, brown wool wrap from some backward island, no doubt, stared at me and then at Selkine. Selkine stared back, her large, luminous brown eyes defiant. The man lowered his eyes, poured wine from a jug into his cup, diluted it with water, took a gulp and gagged. He stared at his wine cup, put it down, rose, and went upstairs. An unpleasant fellow, I thought, but he would apparently keep to himself and not bother his fellow guests at the inn. But two or three other men still had the same glint in their eyes that I must have had over fifteen years ago when I'd first seen Selkine in the port of Piraeus, just below Athens. I vowed to myself to stay close to Selkine.

The innkeeper asked if we had a cart to be taken care of. We did not. We had left Athens in a cart, my own wealth being well enough to afford one, especially since my half brother's merchant ships had substantially increased the family wealth, but at the split in the Delphi road up from Athens, a wheel had broken. I was all for getting it repaired or replaced by a local farmer, but Selkine wouldn't hear of it. She can be superstitious. It worried her that the wheel had broken just at the gorge where, legend has it, Oedipus killed his father. Good Sophist that I am, I informed Selkine that the incident, like most things, could be seen in at least two ways: an omen of danger or a harbinger of truth and understanding. After all, Oedipus had been warned by the oracle that he would kill his father and marry his mother. He had just not had the sense to look into his character to understand his violent nature. I, of course, had the sense to examine all, including myself,

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carefully. Selkine scoffed and said something about my not knowing where my best interests lie. So we paid a passing traveler to go in his cart. I sulked for about an hour afterward, remembering that my half brother and his wife had hurled the same accusation at me.

I informed the innkeeper that we did not have a cart, but that we would be happy if he knew of someone from whom we could rent or buy one.

He said he knew of no one. I saw that the effect of Selkine's beauty had its limits. The innkeepers around Delphi could always ferret out a cart from a local farmer, who, having had a bad harvest or having no need of his carts, was willing to lend one for Athenian coins.

"I could get you a cart."

I turned to the man who sat on a bench by the far wall of the room. His accent, his short hair, new leather sandals, and heavy linen tunic marked him clearly as Athenian, and wealthy at that. But I didn't need my powers of observation to know that. I recognized him.

"Mides," I said. "You must have some vital question for the oracle here to be away from your olive groves and fields in plowing season."

Mides laughed. "I have olive groves here at Delphi as well. In any event, I want to ask the oracle how to keep my sons away from the influence of you Sophists. You do seem to have a powerful pull on the youth of Athens. What is your secret?"

"Words," I said. "We use them to get young men thinking. It can be habit forming."

"Ah. And habits once formed are difficult to break, are they not?"

"Indeed," I said, wondering what was on Mides' mind.

"So if one learns as a youth," he said, rising and coming over to us, "to think that laws and morals and the very gods themselves are relative to a culture, and the common man knows as much as anyone else, then it would be hard to think otherwise, the habit of thinking that way being ingrained. Correct?"

"I hope not, Mides. One needs always to assume that one does not know the whole truth of an issue, any issue. Once one believes that, one ceases to think."

"I see. I hope, Kleides, that you do not consider me such a one."

"Indeed not. I have heard you argue before the assembly. You defend your positions persuasively. As a supporter of democracy, I do not agree with them. I think the common man more capable of making sound judgments than you seem to think him. But I do

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not underestimate the force of the arguments you use to insist that the wealthy and the educated are the most qualified to support and direct the state. But right now, I am interested in how you might obtain a cart for us."

Mides looked appreciatively at Selkine. "I know a local farmer from whom I rent carts here in Delphi. And," he said, leaning toward me to prevent the innkeeper from hearing, "I could get you a better room in a good farmhouse, a room your companion deserves."

"A tempting offer, Mides, for which I thank you. But I believe the inn will suit us fine."

Selkine looked a bit annoyed at my rejection of Mides' offer, but I rather enjoyed the conversation of a tavern's customers, generally practical, honest, and direct. "I would, however, be grateful if you could get that cart."

Mides nodded. He waved away the cup of wine the innkeeper had poured for him. "Of course," he said. "I'll see to it." He left.

I had the feeling that he'd lost interest in us.

We went up to our room and rested. Late in the afternoon, we got up to make our first visit to the sanctuary. We carried our offerings for the gods and headed for the Castilian Spring to cleanse ourselves in its sacred waters.

We made our way into the rectangular paved structure of the spring and took seats on the stone benches that ran along the walls, awaiting our turn to approach the bronze lion heads from which the waters flowed.

I leaned back against the limestone wall, still tired from our two-week journey from Athens, fretting that I had left my city. Tension was still high over Sparta's and Corinth's war challenges. But the problem at hand was to resolve my relationship with Selkine. I knew the status quo could not hold.

My head lolled in the warmth the sun bathed on it, but the mountain air was just cool enough to keep me awake. Through my drowsiness, almost like a mist covering my eyes and seeping into my brain, I watched a young man on his knees before one of the lion heads. He had a terra-cotta cup in one hand, and with it he scooped up water and poured it over his head. His dark curls lengthened with the weight of the water. He lifted up his face on which the water shone in the sunlight. He looked up at the shining rock crags of Mount Parnassus, cliffs from which those deemed by priests to be violators of the sanctuary were thrown.

It occurred to me that a goodly number of people would find pleasure in seeing me, a Sophist and friend of the likes of Socrates and Protagorus, flung off that cliff.

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The young man rose, placed a small gift to the gods in a niche in the wall, and turned to leave. I closed my eyes.

Selkine jabbed my side. "We can approach the fountain now and make our offerings."

The young man stopped by us. He looked admiringly at Selkine, then nodded to me. "You are Kleides of Athens, are you not?"

"I am."

"I am Parmades, also of Athens. I have listened to you lecture on arriving at knowledge by examining opposite ideas: thesis and antithesis. You are quite brilliant, Kleides."

"Thank you. But there is an antithesis to your statement. Some regard me as quite immoral, others as quite a fool."

"I don't think you are a fool. I think, perhaps, you understand human beings and what makes them do what they do. Perhaps, Kleides, we might talk before the day is finished. There may be danger here at Delphi for us Athenians."

I raised my eyebrows. "We are at the inn of Tedar. We will be there tonight if you wish to talk then. Or we can talk now if you wish. Selkine and I have not yet heard from the priests regarding our turn to approach the oracle. I don't know how good our chances are in the lottery since there seems to be a goodly number of pilgrims here."

Parmades nodded. "We will talk this evening then. But be careful at the inn of Tedar. I do not wish to accuse without further evidence, but it may be that all is not as it seems. In the meantime, I am hoping that my name comes up in the lottery this afternoon." He lifted up the small statue he carried. It gleamed in the sun: an exquisite gold statue of Apollo. "My father asked me to give this statue to the priest who will lead me to the oracle."

Selkine gasped. "Oh, but it is truly beautiful. Was it cast in Athens?"

"In the shop of Phidias."

"Ah," I said. "A true work of art then, of inestimable value, like the great gold and ivory statue of Athena inside the Parthenon."

"My father had Phidias cast this small statue as a gift to the god for healing my mother who was ill for some time. She is getting better now. If possible, she and my father will wish to come to Delphi soon themselves to thank the god." Parmades frowned. "I have asked a farmer about carts for them when they arrive. At the farmer's, I saw something that disturbs me. I must have your opinion, Kleides. Now I must see if I can see the oracle. If not, I will visit one of the small local shrines, then seek you out later."

I nodded.

Parmades returned my nod and left.

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I watched him go. I wondered what he wanted to talk about. Parmades did not have a reputation as a deep thinker or debater. He was an ordinary young man, enjoying hetaerae, wrestling at the gym, drinking a little too much on occasion, learning to farm his father's lands efficiently.

"He is solemn for a young man; he is most uneasy," Selkine said.

"Perhaps just the solemnity of the place."

"Perhaps. Let's make our offering."

We made our offering, Selkine placing her terra-cotta statue into a niche in the wall and me placing my offering of wine, which I assumed the priests would much appreciate.

We sat for a while, breathing in the cool mountain air and the smell of pines, then left the spring, Selkine pulling her cloak closely round her shoulders to ward off the chill in the air. We walked through the sanctuary, passed a few wanderers, most of them heading for the treasury buildings of their cities to make an offering there to Apollo, a bribery, as it were, in exchange for the god's prediction of the future or for sage advice for their problems. I noticed the ill-clothed man from the tavern who had shown more interest in his wine than in Selkine. He glared at me. I wondered if he were another traditional Athenian upset at my scientific and sophistic outlook. No matter. I had made enemies before and would, no doubt, do so again, but at least not as many as Socrates had or Euripides, our young iconoclastic playwright.

I directed our path toward the Lesche, the great hall erected by the people of Cnidus, a meeting and discussion place. As always, I was interested in what issues might be under discussion, but I knew too that Selkine wanted to see the famous painting by the great Polygnotus.

Inside, I took a seat on the bench that ran along the walls, while Selkine walked up the great hall to view the paintings.

I heard one of the men next to me mutter "freedom for all Greeks, not just Athenians." The man next to him nudged him and jerked his head toward me. The first man turned, looked at me, then back at his companion. The two rose and walked out of the Lesche.

A tall thin man who had watched the two men leave came over and sat next to me. "Athenian?"

"Yes."

"I'm Thades, from Corcyra Island. We owe you Athenians thanks for sending your warships to defend us against attack by the Corinthians."

"The assembly voted to help Corcyra. You're an ally, after all." I

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smiled. "And besides, we certainly did not want your own fleet of triremes going over to the Corinthian navy."

"But did your assembly realize what sending the warships meant?"

"Many of us did. But we hope war can be avoided."

"I understand that Sparta has demanded that you Athenians drive out those associated with the curse made years ago for the murder of suppliants inside the temple of Athena. That would mean driving out Pericles, whose mother was of the offending family."

"Athens will not drive out Pericles, as the Spartans wish, only because he will not concede to them. In fact, he has issued a demand to the Spartans to expiate their own curse for killing their slaves, the Helots, who had taken refuge in a temple."

"Ah," Thades said raising his thin eyebrows. "The Helots. The Spartans talk of freedom for the Greeks, yet they enslave the vast majority of their own people and those they take in war. Someday, such a policy will bring them to ruin."

I nodded. "Indeed, Pericles hopes so. He issued the decree to remind all Greeks that the Spartans enslave their people."

"I need no reminding. I am no friend of Sparta. No Corcyran is. Like you Athenians, we prefer democracy. But I fear war. Will you Athenians fight?"

I looked carefully at Thades. I knew that Pericles' intent was to draw all the Athenians inside the city wall if Sparta attacked, and to let Sparta spin its wheels outside. The Spartans would burn our fields and crops, but no matter. Our great navy would keep us supplied with wheat from the Black Sea area and from Egypt. But I had no intentions of discussing Pericles' plans in any detail in a public place. For all I knew, Thades was a spy. "We will do what we have to do," I said. I rose, sorry to part company with a man who seemed intelligent, but I knew the care one had to take in this impending storm.

Mides came in and invited me to the villa where he was staying for an evening of wine and discussion. I declined, citing Selkine's presence and the young Parmades' desire to talk to me.

Mides looked over at Selkine. "I understand. Another time."

I went over to Selkine. She was standing, apparently awestruck in front of one of the great paintings. I knew the painting that had mesmerized her. It chilled my blood. Polygnotus had painted the destruction of Troy. I went to Selkine's side and stared at the painting. I had, when I'd seen the painting before, admired the beauty of its reds for the fires that burned Troy, of the white and black of the tunics, of the yellow of Helen's hair. I'd admired the

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purity of the lines and the dramatic placement of figures. Now I saw the anguish on the faces of the women as they were dragged into slavery, the pain on the faces of the dead men, the blood that seemed to flow from the very walls of the city, the rubble that had once been homes and temples. Polygnotus had drawn well the horror of war, belying the glory that we Greeks had always seen in it.

I looked at Selkine's face. I took her arm. Her flesh was warm, her skin smooth and soft. I understood why our great poetess Sappho had written that the sight of a loved one was worth the sights of all the warriors in the world.

Selkine put her hand on my arm, and we left the Lesche. Outside, it was still light, and we sat for a while. In the distance, we saw Parmades and a priest talking. They parted and Parmades passed by, greeting us and explaining that he'd been lucky. He'd been told that someone had lost their turn in the lottery and that he would get to visit the oracle now. He indicated that he still wanted to talk to me later.

The sky began to turn to a pale blue with streaks of rose shooting from the descending sun. The sun still lit portions of the shining rock cliff behind us, but dark shadows had begun to score the gray rock face.

A few torches carried by departing pilgrims flickered bright orange against the dark green pines. One man, his cloak wrapped tightly round him against the cool air, sat on a low wall, his head down. I assumed he had received a disturbing answer to whatever question he had posed for the god.

In the valley below, between Mount Parnassus and Mount Desphina, the white columns of the Tholos glowed rosy in the setting sun as pilgrims paying homage to Athena and her temple began to light their torches for their walk back to inns, tents, and farmhouses. The River Pleistos shone silver on its winding way through the olive groves to the bay of Itea beyond. A quiet peace had settled over the sanctuary.

Selkine and I walked past the theatre and looked down on the city treasuries, housing the donations of the pilgrims. On the treasury of Athens, we could see the sculptures of Heracles on the back of the building. I wondered if the Spartans still took offense to our placing their hero and his exploits on the backside of our treasury.

Beside me, Selkine murmured about the beauty of the scene. I turned and saw the golden color of her olive skin in the remaining sun. I wanted her badly. I took her arm again. She smiled, and

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we moved forward down the slope to one of the sanctuary's entrance gates.

Just outside the entrance gate, we stopped at the table of a local vendor, a miniaturist selling his pen and ink papyrus drawings of the temple of Apollo. I was digging out a few obols from inside my tunic when we heard it. A high-pitched screech. Selkine looked about, as did I.

"What was that?" she asked.

The vendor shrugged. "A bird, no doubt. An eagle or an owl. Sounded like an eagle. They have a high pitch. Sound almost human, don't they?"

"An eagle. Zeus' bird," Selkine whispered. "Is it an omen?"

"It's just an eagle," I said. I looked around at the deep valley running to the bay of Itea. "Maybe." I noticed that the man who had wrapped himself in his cloak and sat on the wall had also come to the gate. He was staring at the great cliff to the side of the sanctuary.

"Maybe?" Selkine said.

"It's almost dusk. Most birds have settled in for the night."

"Then it is a special eagle. Sent by Zeus."

"Selkine," I said, a little exasperated, "if it is an eagle, it is out for some eagle reason we don't know. It has nothing to do with signs or omens."

Selkine sighed. "I suppose. But something is wrong here. It has been a day of strange keens in the air. I hardly know what to think." She smiled. "But let us not allow this Delphic mystery to spoil our evening. We can ask the innkeeper to send up some good Chian wine and wheat bread and cheese and maybe even a roasted swallow. We have the night." She turned and looked up toward the temple where the priests led pilgrims to the pythia, the woman who interpreted the god's answers. "Then we will see."

We returned to the inn, told the innkeeper our wants, and retired to our room. It was sparsely furnished, but we needed little other than the small table and the bed that had soft leather coverings and warm rabbit furs. Selkine had carried a basket with good linen, and we spread it on top of the leather. We ate the food, dipped our bread into the sweet white wine and made love. Even in the dim light of the oil lamps, Selkine's skin shone with a silky glow.

Afterward, we talked of many things, Selkine arguing that the great poetess Sappho surpassed Homer, I arguing that no one surpassed his stories of Achilles and Odysseus. It was a good evening.

We decided on more wine, and I dressed to go downstairs to get it.

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I descended the wooden stairs as fast as I could, wanting to get the wine quickly and to return to Selkine. It wasn't until I stepped into the tavern room that I realized that something was strange. I should have been hearing voices, some drunken, some argumentative, some laughing. I had not been.

Now I noticed that the tavern was unnaturally quiet. Only a murmuring rose from the ten or so men gathered there. I looked around at them. The innkeeper saw me and turned away. The sullen man with the bad haircut looked up at me. Then, as before, he returned to his wine.

Mides rose and approached me. "Have you heard the news, Kleides?"

I shook my head, fearing that war had begun.

"Someone died at the sanctuary today. Fell from the great cliff. A horrible accident."

"When?" I asked, remembering the cry of an eagle that had sounded human.

Mides shook his head. "No one knows. Perhaps in the early evening, the priests think. They found his body just before the sanctuary was closed for the day."

"Who died? Do the priests know?"

Mides nodded. "It was the young Athenian, Parmades. He must have been visiting one of the ancient shrines to Mother Earth high on the cliffs."

I shook my head, trying to clear it of the sensual warmth of wine and sex. "Parmades. He asked to see me this evening. I'd forgotten."

"Poor Parmades," Mides said. "He perhaps wanted to talk of some philosophical or scientific matter with you. Now he will talk no more. Kleides, he was an Athenian of a good family. Perhaps you could inquire after his movements and his death. The family will want to know. I will help where I can if you wish."

I nodded. "Of course. Tomorrow I will go to the place where the priests found his body. I will do what I can. For now, goodnight, Mides." I turned to the stairs, but remembered Parmades' words about a farmer. I wondered. "Mides, were you able to get a cart for us?"

Mides shook his head. "I am sorry, Kleides. I haven't seen the farmer. He has left to tend his olive groves his wife tells me. But if he returns soon, I will ask. Our innkeeper may know when the farmer returns."

There were many farmers about Delphi, but this one who knew people at the inn might prove to be Parmades' farmer.

I returned to Selkine and told her the bad news. She, too, remembered the scream we thought had been an eagle.

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The next morning I left Selkine early to inspect the place where the body was found. I saw nothing to tell me anything of what might have happened, nor did I expect to find much. The body had fallen from the rocky crag outside the sanctuary wall in a direct line just near the great three-serpented tripod that held the golden cauldron in honor of the Greek naval victory of Plataea that had ended our wars with the Persians.

Ampheus, a priest on duty whom I recognized as the one talking yesterday with Parmades, told me that the body had been cleansed, oiled, and buried. A local man had been sent to Athens to inform the family of the death. I would have liked to have examined the body, but I could hardly demand that Parmades be dug up. I asked why Parmades had been buried so quickly.

Ampheus shook his gray locks at me and waved a ringed finger. "We cannot have the sanctuary of Apollo corrupted with a dead body."

"Could Parmades not have been held somewhere outside the sanctuary?" I persisted.

"He could not." Ampheus' large nose seemed to drag down his whole face with its weight, giving him a dour look. I disliked him, not for his bad nose in contrast to my straight one, my best, possibly, I must admit, my only really good feature, but for his imperiousness.

"Had you spoken to Parmades at all while he was here at Delphi?"

"Possibly. I do not remember. I must return to the temple." Ampheus turned and walked away.

The churlish priest was lying; I myself had seen him talking with Parmades. Of course, it was possible that the conversation was so insignificant as to be easily forgotten, but I thought not.

I began to consider that I was dealing with murder and not an accident. Suicide was a possibility, but it is hardly in human nature to ask so solemnly, Selkine's word, to speak with someone and then to commit suicide a few hours later. There had been an urgency about Parmades' request. Had I been more alert and less drowsy with sun and Selkine, I might have urged Parmades to talk then and there. I might have prevented his death. I owed it to him to discover what had happened.

I started by taking the circuitous route round and up the cliff. As I climbed, I sweated. I could see why the shrine to the earth goddess was not much visited. On the other hand, perhaps my half brother and his wife were right. I was spending too much time reading and not enough time at the gymnasium.

Even Parmades, twenty years younger than myself and in con-

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siderably better condition, would have had to have a compelling reason to climb this mountain to go to this particular shrine. What or who had compelled him?

I reached the top of the cliff and hobbled toward the edge. My boot was worn, since, as usual, I had purchased a new papyrus of Herodotus' instead of new boots. I looked over the sanctuary. Its stadium at the tip, its theatre carved into the mountainside, and below that the temple—body, mind, and soul. Delphi provided for all three. The view alone was, indeed, worth the climb.

I stepped farther to the edge. There was a rocky slope upward, small but definite enough to call one's attention to how close one stood to the edge. Parmades had not fallen accidentally, unless he had been drunk, as drunk as Elpenor in the *Odyssey*, or truly careless, and he had seemed neither. Someone had persuaded Parmades to come up this cliff and had struck him or simply pushed him over. He must have known the person and believed himself in no danger to have stood here with his assailant.

I needed to talk with people, with anyone who had talked with Parmades in the last several days, including the unpleasant Ampheus, who had apparently insisted on the immediate burial of the body. To hide signs of a struggle on the body? To subdue any speculation as soon as possible?

I made my way carefully down the shining rocks and back to the inn.

The inn was crowded, but the men were not carrying on the usual arguments over whether hot and cold were truly different phenomena or just differing aspects of the same phenomenon, my belief, or the usual discussion of the virtues of tyranny over democracy. Instead, the men sat in clusters, talking in low voices. I could hear words such as curse, corruption, and even blood revenge, a barbarian idea we Athenians had replaced with trial by jury.

Mides rose and approached me. "Have you discovered anything about Parmades' death?"

I nodded but declined to explain. "Can you tell me if any of the men here knew or had talked with Parmades?"

Mides looked about. "Several. Parmades did eat here a few times. Most travelers do. The goat cheese and olives are superb."

"Point out the men who had some acquaintance with Parmades."

Mides gestured to one cluster and said two men there had talked with and eaten with Parmades, as he himself had, without noticing any anxiety on Parmades' part. Mides pointed out a third man drinking by himself. I thought it might be the man we had

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seen yesterday on arrival, but this man's hair seemed better cut. I had paid little attention yesterday, bad behavior for a Sophist. We pride ourselves on our powers of observation.

"Thanks, Mides," I said. "I may need your help later."

He nodded and returned to his stool, ordering, I presumed, goat cheese and olives. I decided I'd have to try some if they were good enough to draw Mides here, when with his wealth, he could have had food prepared specially for him at the villa where he was staying.

I joined the cluster of men Mides had pointed out and introduced myself. I got to the point, asking what they could tell me of Parmades.

One of the four men shrugged. One got up and walked away. One of the other two, a young man with a face worthy of Apollo himself, said he'd talked with Parmades.

"Several times," he said, rather proudly. "Parmades just didn't understand that all moral beliefs are mere human devices. I had to explain several times that the truest guide for behavior is to do what is expedient."

The other young man, with a snub nose more like Socrates' than like a god's, smiled. "Yes, Eteocles, you did explain *over and over*."

Eteocles nodded, failing to get the sarcasm. He'd also failed to understand that while we Sophists saw that belief in the divine for moral guidance was ruled by one's culture, we also believed that behavior should be guided by what promoted excellence and the common good.

"I take it Parmades did not agree with you, Eteocles?" I asked.

"No. He did not. My arguments overwhelmed him."

I looked to the other young man.

"Parmades did not argue. He was quiet, reserved. I had the feeling he was concerned with other things."

The man seated alone scoffed. "Parmades was a sneaky one."

"Sneaky?" I queried, noting that the man's accent marked him as a man of Chios, in the league of Athens. I wondered about the welts on his hands.

The man stuffed a hunk of goat cheese into his mouth. After a bit, he spoke. "You couldn't get an opinion out of him. Just questions. I told him our Chian honey was far tastier than your Athenian honey, even to the dullest of tongues and not just us beekeepers. Our bees are blessed by the gods."

Like Parmades, I didn't argue the point, though I understood the pocked hands then: multiple bee stings. I would have liked to question him about why the gods concerned themselves with bee

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quality, but I had more important concerns. "What questions did he have?"

"He asked if I'd recognize a Spartan when I saw one, even one in disguise. Stupid question. Who wouldn't recognize those long-haired sacks of muscles with no brains."

"Why did you find Parmades sneaky?"

The man spat out a bit of cheese. "Fishbrain. A man who doesn't like to argue and who asks too many questions is sneaky." He gave me a knowing look and stomped out of the tavern.

Eteocles laughed. "Parmades also wanted to know if I knew which of the priests here were particularly trustworthy. As if a priest could explain anything. Parmades did not understand that the soul is a natural part of the material world." Eteocles leaned back pompously against the wall.

I hoped that the beetle he'd leaned against would get into his tunic. Eteocles was one of the young men of Athens who had given Sophists a bad name. But though he'd failed to detect the worry that lay behind Parmades' questions, he'd given me useful information. Parmades had been troubled about a Spartan and was looking for a trustworthy priest to speak to. He'd obviously had doubts about some of the priests. I wondered if he'd thought Ampheus trustworthy or not.

I was about to talk to Mides when Selkine entered the tavern, accompanied by the servant woman she'd hired here at Delphi. She stopped in the doorway and looked round. "Kleides," she said, "do let's go upstairs to our room." She motioned to me to follow her upstairs.

The glow in her eyes compelled me to follow her. Something had excited Selkine, and she was always at her most beautiful when excited, her eyes a bright golden brown, her movements swift and flowing, like those our poets give to the huntress goddess, Artemis.

I followed her, the pull of Aphrodite, our goddess of love, turning my brain to barley mush. At that moment, only Selkine mattered. Is there any greater fool than a Sophist in love?

I closed the door of our room behind me and reached for Selkine.

She stepped back. "Not now, Kleides. I have something important to tell you."

"Important," I repeated dully. I would have been hard pressed at that moment to properly identify myself if I had to.

"Yes. I was in the village with my servant woman. We stopped at the house of a farmer renting carts and providing food and other items for pilgrims. I wanted some good olive oil for my skin. Inside

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the house, I saw a man seated on a stool by a small wooden table. It was dim inside and it took a moment for my eyes to see clearly. But then I recognized the man. Kleides, are you listening to me?"

I blinked several times and tried to forget that the call of Aphrodite would have been quite visible had my tunic not been loose and bulky. "I'm listening," I managed.

"I recognized him. He was the man with the badly cut hair who was in the tavern when we arrived."

"I see," I said, not seeing at all what had excited Selkine.

"I should have known that evening of our arrival. I had noticed how he was drinking, but I simply did not recognize its importance, so I did not think of what he was. Recall that he gagged on the wine he'd mixed with water. But I knew today. The man was eating a black broth and drinking a dark wine. He had no cup for water to mix with the wine."

"Black broth," I said, alert now, "and undiluted wine. A Spartan."

"Of course. Only Spartans eat that vile broth of vinegar, salt, pork stock, and animal blood. But, Kleides, the man did not have the long hair of the Spartans."

I frowned in thought. "No, his hair was cut short. He was pretending to be something other than a Spartan. The only Spartans who travel as Spartans are diplomats. If a Spartan leaves Sparta with his hair cut, he is on a spy mission."

"Something else, Kleides. The man had with him a cloak of dark, rough wool. I know there are many such cloaks, but when he swung it over his shoulders, I felt I had seen his figure before."

"At dusk when we left the sanctuary yesterday."

"Exactly," Selkine said.

I went up to her and took her by the shoulders. "Selkine, you have proven yourself the real student of nature today. You've beaten me at my own game of observation. And you may very well have solved the murder of Parmades."

Selkine's eyes glittered. "So, you believe he was murdered?"

"I'm sure of it. And you have just given me the motive. If the Spartan is here on a spy mission to discover what he could about our plans for war, Parmades may have realized it. Like you, he obviously suspected the man of being Spartan. He may have known, too, that one of the priests was involved with the Spartans, relaying information picked up from pilgrims."

Selkine frowned. "There was a priest at the sanctuary yesterday talking to Parmades."

"Yes. A priest named Ampheus. I wonder if he told Parmades to meet him at the top of the shining cliffs."

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"But why would Parmades have gone up if he suspected a conspiracy?"

I frowned again. "I don't know. But priests can be formidable, especially to someone not usually skeptical about religious matters. I'll have to talk to Ampheus again." I looked at Selkine's beautiful face. "Selkine, avoid the Spartan. Promise me. If he suspects that you know what he is, you could be in danger."

"As are you. I know you cannot take me with you. But take someone. Mides, perhaps."

I agreed and turned to leave, but stopped at the door and looked back at Selkine. I think it was then that I saw Selkine for the first time—not as I did so many years ago in our port of Piraeus when she was very young, clever, and sure of her beauty, but as she had become: full, experienced in life and love, aware of her powers of mind as well as body. I realized with a shock that I loved her. "Avoid the Spartan," I said. "Promise."

She promised. "I intend to rest for a while."

I left. I should have made her promise not to leave the tavern.

Downstairs, I looked for Mides and asked him to keep watch over Selkine while I went out. "I must go up to the sanctuary, and I do not want her left alone. She may be in some danger."

Mides' eyes opened wide, but he asked no questions. "I'll stay all night if necessary. I'm sure the innkeeper will give me a room."

From behind us, the innkeeper grunted. Mides and I took the grunt as assent.

"Fine," I said, relieved. "Be sure that Selkine stays inside."

Mides nodded. "I'll just go to the villa where I'm staying to get some things. I'll return within the hour."

"Fine. Selkine is resting now. But get back as soon as you can."

I went back upstairs to tell Selkine that Mides would return to the tavern later and would be there if she needed him. Back downstairs, I remembered Selkine's admonition to take someone with me. Not seeing the innkeeper, I asked his wife where her husband was, but she shrugged. "Out," she said.

I went alone to the sanctuary.

The sun still shone on the mountain of Parnassus. I had an hour or so before the sun sank below the horizon. I headed up to the Lesche, hoping that Ampheus might be there on some administrative duty. He was not. I trudged back down to the bouleuterion where the aldermen of Delphi held their meetings. Ampheus was not there.

I headed down toward the treasuries, hoping to find one of the security men of Delphi. Perhaps he might be able to tell me if Ampheus was at the sanctuary or not. A security man might also

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be able to tell me who Ampheus had been seen with over the last several days.

I passed the treasury houses, stopping briefly to look at the sculptures of our hero Theseus on the front pediment. Our myths said that he had successfully defeated the Minotaur and saved Athenian youths from terrible deaths by the beast, then returned to Athens to found a democracy, the democracy now in danger. I stood in the cool breeze blowing off the mountains and shivered, wondering whether Parmades' death was the first of many to come for Athens. What conspiracy was brewing to bring us down?

I shook off my fears as best I could and continued down the sacred way. I passed by the treasury of Siphnos, with its magnificent statues holding up bell-shaped capitals. The statues' eyes, inlaid gems, glowed in the sun's fading light. I felt that they were watching me, and as I moved down the sacred way, I swung back around to look at them. I could have sworn that the shadow of one of them moved toward me. I chastised myself for letting my fears gnaw away at my reason, but that did not stop me from feeling relieved when I spotted a security man. He said he needed to secure the temple when the last pilgrim left and to see the sibyl and the priests safely out of the sanctuary, but that he would speak with me before he secured the doors for the evening. I agreed to meet him at the northwestern gate below the theatre. I could, he said, leave by that exit, the last one he would have to secure for the night.

I walked up to the gate, breathing in the smell of pine and listening to the cry of eagles as they flew home to their nests. I envied them. I longed for the joy and warmth of Selkine and, perhaps for the first time, understood Odysseus' longing to be home with his wife, Penelope.

I started at a sound that echoed off the sloped seats of the theatre. A rock, dislodged by a walker. I looked around. Several people were still moving about the sanctuary, including two men headed to the gate and the stoa beyond, a place to rest or to take shelter from the mountain's cold air or blowing storms. I considered taking shelter there myself, but I did not want to miss the security man. I consoled myself with climbing the stairs to look at the great bronze charioteer that Polyzalos of Gela had erected in gratitude for his victory in the games of Delphi. Even in the fading light, the charioteer's intense gaze mesmerized me. His powerful neck, his tousled hair, the strong bend of his arms, all marked him as a victor. The sculptor, Critias of Athens, had created a masterpiece.

I was absorbed in studying the face of the charioteer when the

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blow came. Had I not bent forward to better see the finely molded folds in the bronze dress, I would have taken the blow full on my head. As it was, the blow fell on my shoulder. I pitched forward, fell, rolled, and scrambled up, fully expecting to see the Spartan coming at me.

It was Tedar, the innkeeper. He had a narrow-necked urn in his hand, and he came at me, swinging the urn. I dodged, ducking behind one of the bronze horses of Polyzalos' chariot. The innkeeper came on. I dropped on all fours and scurried under the horse. I managed to get out from under the horse and dashed for the stairs. I had three flights to get down before I could reach the level of the sanctuary. I could hear the innkeeper grunting behind me. I raced for the gate, hoping the two men I'd seen were still in the stoa.

Behind me, the innkeeper grunted again, closer. I could almost feel his breath. Then the urn struck me on the side of the head. I lurched toward the sanctuary wall. The innkeeper had flung the urn, and it had hit its mark. I turned to face my attacker.

Someone brushed by me. I blinked, focused, and saw the security man thrust the innkeeper up against the wall of the great bronze sculpture.

I thanked Apollo for my rescue and dashed to help the security man. He was muttering darkly about the punishment for violence in the sanctuary. He didn't need my help. He hauled the innkeeper toward the gate, admonishing me to leave before he returned.

I leaned against the wall of the sanctuary, dabbing the side of my head with my tunic. My head hurt, but I was not seriously injured. No doubt, I would live to lose another fight with someone and need rescuing.

I dabbed at my head again. The bleeding had slowed down considerably, and I began to think again. The innkeeper must have killed Parmades. He was certainly too dense to be involved in any conspiracy, but he was brutal and crude enough to commit murder for a bribe. In any event, I would know tomorrow. I hoped that the security man and I could intimidate Tedar enough to make him tell us who the briber was, though I had no doubt it was the priest Ampheus.

Glad to see a bright moon beginning to light the sanctuary, I was turning toward the gate when I heard the scream. High and clear, it rang out from the theatre and echoed off the temple and the cliffs, ricocheting through the sanctuary.

I knew that clear voice. It was Selkine's.

The scream came again, and I raced for the stairs, taking them three at a time. I rounded the mound at the side of the theatre and ran toward the nearest aisle.

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I could see, at the top of the theatre's steep wooden seats, three figures, struggling as if each were determined to fling the other two down the seats to their deaths.

I raced up the wooden stairs, my heart and head beating and my knees protesting. Just as I reached the top, I saw Selkine lift her arm, white in the increasingly bright moonlight, and thrust it forward. The man she was struggling with lurched back. I jumped to the top level of the theatre and ran toward the threesome, now only twenty footlengths away from me.

I saw Mides, apparently just as he saw me. He clutched at his nose, turned and ran, heading to the right and up the narrow path that led to the stadium.

"Kleides," Selkine shouted. "Mides is the murderer. I'm sure of it."

I confess to feeling startled, even shocked. How had Selkine, a woman, solved the murder of Parmades when I had not? My mixed emotions slowed my headlong pursuit of Mides up the hill. I hardly knew what I was feeling: pride at Selkine's intelligence, disgust with my own obtuseness at Delphi, and—I do confess it—almost jealousy at Selkine's competence.

I managed to keep my wits enough to yell to Selkine to seek out the security guard in the stoa, then concentrated on running uphill to catch up with Mides. I could only hope that he had not worked out too much at our gymnasiums recently.

I made the turn that brought me out at the entrance to the high stadium. I was breathless in the thin air so high on Mount Parnassus. I raked my eyes over the stadium and the side mounds on which spectators sat. No one. I turned and looked straight ahead. Thirty or so footlengths in front of me, Mides was leaning against the wall that ran alongside the dirt path. Mides turned, saw me, and ran.

I knew where he was heading. He would move along the path beside the stadium, then curve into the woods, race down the hill and out of the sanctuary. Once he moved into the woods, I could lose him.

I made a quick decision. My plan would work if the path's rocks, curves, and holes held him up a bit.

I dashed into the stadium and ran at the full length of the straight, smooth, hard running surface: a stade. I could almost have wished that there were an audience of Athenians to cheer me on. At the uppermost part of the stadium, I clambered onto the gangway that allowed spectators to move about on the seating mounds. At the top of the seating mound, I saw Mides approaching. I stooped down and waited. My wait was short.

I jumped from the top of the narrow stairway that led out of the

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stadium and landed full force on Mides. He grunted loudly. We rolled toward the trees, neither of us retaining enough strength to fight. We stopped rolling and lay with our arms around each other, like two lovers. Even then, I thought that our young playwright, Euripides, would have loved the irony.

I was staring at Mides' bloody nose when the security man yanked us apart.

"He killed Parmades," I said.

"The woman told me," the security guard said.

Mides glared at me but remained silent. The security guard hauled him off down the path, past Selkine who ran to me.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

I nodded. "And you?"

We wrapped our arms around each other.

When we drew apart, I caught my breath at the sight of Selkine's face bathed in moonlight. Her eyes were luminous, her smile knowing.

"I didn't know," I said, "that you could throw a punch that could give a man a bloody nose. And what were you doing in the sanctuary anyway? How did you know that Mides . . ."

She laughed. "Stop firing questions more quickly than Socrates can, and I'll tell you."

I fell silent.

We turned to walk toward the sanctuary exit, Selkine's clear musical voice explaining what had happened. "I just couldn't imagine why Mides would give up staying in a villa to watch over me in the tavern. He likes luxury."

"Really?"

"Didn't you notice his tunic. The best of linen. And he uses high quality olive oil on his skin."

I had to confess that I hadn't noticed. I'd been in a kind of daze the whole while at Delphi, worrying about my and Selkine's future.

"I also wondered," Selkine continued, "why he felt it necessary to go to the villa to get things. The innkeeper's wife told me he had taken a room, then gone back to the villa. I wondered why he couldn't just send one of his servants or pay someone to go to the villa. For that matter, why couldn't he send a servant to watch over me. The answer was obvious."

"Obvious?" I said, feeling like one of Socrates' less astute students.

"Yes. I realized that he wanted personally to keep an eye on both of us. He did so from the first moment we arrived at the tavern, either watching us himself or sending the Spartan."

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I rolled my eyes. "Thus his offer to get a cart for us. And the man in the cloak at the sanctuary."

"No doubt also the reason he offered to help you find Parmades' murderer. But tonight he clearly had something important at the villa he wanted to have with him. So after he returned, I had my servant woman watch his room. When he left to go down to the tavern, I went into the room. I found this."

She held up her right hand. The golden statue of Apollo gleamed in the moonlight.

"Parmades' father's gift to the sanctuary," I said.

Selkine nodded. "I left the tavern to get it to you. I thought I'd snuck out, but Mides obviously saw and followed me. When he attacked and tried to throw me down the theatre stairs, I hit him with the statue. It must have been Mides who was conspiring with the Spartan, telling him I don't know what. He was never a supporter of the democracy."

"No, he wasn't," I said. "I should have known. I suspect he was telling Ampheus the plans Pericles has in case of war."

"But surely those are public knowledge, discussed in the assembly," Selkine protested.

"But where Pericles would send out triremes and how we would get supplies and water into the city, where our walls are vulnerable, are not public knowledge. Mides would have told Ampheus, and Ampheus told the Spartan. That way, Mides would have had no direct, incriminating contact with the Spartan."

"But why kill Parmades?"

"Remember what Parmades told us at the fountain? That someone dangerous was at the tavern. I think that, like you, he must have recognized the Spartan as a Spartan, likely at the farmer's, just as you did." I shook my head. "When I stupidly told Mides that Parmades wanted to talk with me, Mides must have gotten suspicious. I suspect he got word to Ampheus to keep Parmades at the sanctuary, then sought him out and persuaded him to go up to the cliff, an opportunity to visit a local shrine and have a very private place to discuss a possible conspiracy. Parmades would have gone with Mides, perhaps distrustful of Ampheus, but never suspecting Mides' role in the conspiracy."

Selkine held up the statue. "Mides' downfall. His greed."

I nodded. "I wonder how much the Spartans paid Mides to betray Athens." I looked over toward the Lesche with its painting of the fall of Troy. "Would Mides have helped the Spartans breach our walls? I suspect so."

"For enough gold," Selkine said. She smiled. His name is appro-

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priate, isn't it? Like the Phrygian king whose golden touch became a curse."

We turned at the gate and looked over the sanctuary under the moonlight. The columns of Apollo's temple glowed against the shining rocks. Here and there, the moonlight touched the serene faces of the statues scattered throughout the sanctuary that we Greeks consider the center of the universe, the *omphalos*, the naval, the central point. But in the background, the valleys were dark and foreboding.

I looked at Selkine and knew that she was my *omphalos*. "Selkine," I said. "Let us marry. Let us be together." Perhaps I would always idealize Aspasia, Pericles' mistress, but I would always love Selkine.

She smiled. "I will consult the oracle."

I swallowed. "To see whom you should marry?"

"To see if we will have sons and daughters."

I put my arm around her, and we stepped to the gate of the sanctuary. An owl hooted, a long, low sound.

As a Sophist, I did not believe in omens. Those who did might have taken the hoot as a warning of the trials Athens, Selkine, and I, together, would have to face.

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THE OTHER WOMAN

ROB KANTNER

To enter the exercise room, you needed a guest key. I was no guest—just a trespasser. Luckily, a withered grayhair, flushed and dripping, picked that instant to exit. He even held the door for me.

Inside, a young man in red shorts and white wife-beater tee lay on a mat, worshiping in the wall-to-wall mirrors the sight of his tanned hairy self doing odd things with iron dumbbells. Back in the corner was Micki Quick. Micheline A. Quick, that is: J.D., MBA, LL.M., doing eight mph headed nowhere. She waved me over. "Thanks for stopping by," she said, puffing air as she bounced on her short, bare, flawless legs along the whirring treadmill belt.

"Heck, I live practically next door," I exaggerated. Belleville is in fact two towns down 94 from Ann Arbor. Micki's call had come just as I was turning my guys loose on the day's tasks. "You stayed here overnight?"

She nodded. Micki was in her early thirties, short and slight, with gleaming close-clipped blond hair and a peaches-and-cream complexion. "Doing a seminar," she said, with what air she could muster as she pounded away, at once in flight and stationary, sneakers doing the *whap-whap-whap* on the rubber belt. "Too far to drive from home."

That's right, she lived in Washington Township, on the way opposite side of the city of Detroit. I heard the dumbbells clank, and the young man left the room. Micki hit some buttons on the treadmill console. It slowed down to a brisk walking pace that she seemed relieved to adopt, pacing along smartly, bare arms swinging. She wore snug charcoal shorts with white piping and a matching V-neck sleeveless racerback. With all the mirrors in there, every available angle offered an eyeful. I kept my thoughts pure, my gaze from lingering. She was way too young, way too spoken for, and—just as important—a regular client.

"This isn't exactly a case," she said.

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"Okay." I wished I'd brought coffee with me. I hadn't had my morning gallon yet.

"I'm litigating a wrongful death matter," she said. "My client's husband was killed in an industrial accident."

"Ouch."

"Crushed in a twenty-thousand-ton hydraulic press."

"Sorry to hear." We'd had such behemoths at Ford's, way back when. The image sickened me. I eyed Micki. "And the widow wants her dough."

When they say it's not about the money, it's about the money.

Micki glanced at me. "What she wants," she said evenly, "is justice."

"In the form of large amounts of legal tender."

"That's the mode by which people extract justice from corporations that are negligent."

"Okay." I wasn't getting into it with her. But I've found that when they say it's not about the money, it's about the money. "How can I help?"

"I remember you saying once . . . didn't you used to do work for Coyne Cose?"

"Long time ago, when the old man ran it."

"I miss Arnie," she smiled, and shot me a look. "I heard you and Arnie Junior didn't bring out the best in each other."

"Ted. He insists on being called Ted. You know his TV jingle? 'Call Ted Instead'?"

"To which of your traits did he object?" Micki asked with a puckish smile. "Your irreverence, your investigatorial exuberance, or your abrupt and alarming attacks of ethics?"

"Let's just say, we went our separate ways."

"So who replaced you?"

"Huh?"

"Who handles their investigations now?"

"Last I heard, uh . . . Del Laing."

"You know him?"

I shrugged. "Seen him around."

She hit the stop button and stepped off the treadmill. I handed her a towel. "Excellent," she smiled, patting her dampish blond hair.

"Why?"

"Well. In my wrongful death matter, Coyne Cose represents the employer. Stone Automotive."

Ah yes. Deep pockets. "And?"

"And, I've picked up rumors that the defense will allege that the victim, at the time of his death, was having an extramarital affair."

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"Um," I fumbled, "I'm no lawyer—and my degree is from Hard Knocks U. But say they prove the victim was stepping out. How does that help their defense?"

"An element in calculating damages is loss of consortium for the wife, who is my client. She lost the companionship and comfort of her husband," Micki said delicately. She led me toward the exercise room door. In the floor-to-ceiling mirrors we presented quite a contrast: The rosy, slight, almost elfin attorney in shorts, and the taller, darker, broad-shouldered hombre wearing polo shirt and jeans, and a weathered, battered, quizzical look—a poster boy for *Huh?* "If the defense can show that the husband was, uh—"

"Doin' the comfort thing elsewhere?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes. Whatever. If they can prove that, it could significantly mitigate damages."

"Meaning less dough for the widow," I translated.

"Precisely."

"Not that it's about the dough."

She tossed the towel into a hamper, raised a hand, flattened the other, miming an oath on an invisible Bible. "She's that one-in-a-million instance where it's absolutely true, Ben."

"Okay. So what do you need from me?"

"Well, Coyne Cose uses Del Laing for investigations. And you know Del Laing. So it stands to reason that you might perhaps—"

"Reach out to him?"

"Yes. And dig up—if you can—details about this alleged affair."

"Details."

"Just get me the identity of the other woman. So we can be prepared for whatever they throw at us."

"Okay. Can I ask another question?"

"Of course."

"What does the widow say about the, uh, affair rumor?"

"Quote 'not in a million billion years would he do that to me,' unquote."

Another rarity, I thought.

Micki eyed me. "How about it?"

In most situations like this my answer would have been sorry, no. But Micki was a client, and one of the better ones. And I liked her. So what if she hung her hat in collegial, high-cotton Oakland County? She worked and won cases in smash-mouth Wayne County too—native good cheer and dewy looks notwithstanding—sticking up for people without means, clout, or friends. My kind of folks. Micki believed the widow was acting more on principle than on greed. She also believed that the late husband, having been

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unjustly killed, was now having his reputation trashed. And that was good enough for me.

Plus which, I did know Del Laing.

Well enough to know that timing things right was the key to having my way with him. He was rather predictable, you see.

And sure enough, I found him when expected—three P.M.—as well as where—Jugg's Astro Lanes down in Ecorse, not far from the Detroit and Shoreline Railroad tracks. He occupied the same corner black leatherette booth, smoked the same Tareytons, and drank the same Stroh's Dark that I remembered. Judging from the empties, he was just finishing his third. And, as I also recalled, he was more than happy to accept a free refill. By five or six, I figured, he'd be walking on a slant.

"Ben Perkins! I'll be damned. Slide on in, man," he said genially, taking the fresh mug in his two big paws. Del was a blousy, pear-shaped middle-ager with thinning dark hair combed straight back and a sad-eyed, hang-dog face that was always ready with excuses. He wore a navy Local 600 jacket that I knew good and well could never have been issued to him. His white shirt had an open collar that showed a bouquet of grayish black hair. "What're you doing these days?"

"Little of this, little of that." I lighted a short cork-tipped cigar, glad to be smoking somewhere other than my apartment or my car or the great—and, it being March, frigid—outdoors. Clearly the no-smoking rules hadn't made it this far downriver. "You're still with Coyne Cose, I hear."

"Come on, Ben, you know I can't talk about that."

"Jeez, Del. What's the big state secret? I just asked where you work."

He looked at me, away, at me again. "Yeah yeah, you're right."

Bowling pins thundered in the distance. Two women laughed at the bar. Excellent, I thought. After all these years, Del's squishy as ever. "Nice gig. Been at it a while."

"You know, it's, y'know," he said, and took a hit off his cigarette. "It goes like it goes."

"You get along all right with Arnie Junior?"

Del flinched. "His name's Ted," he said, lowering his voice.

"Is it my imagination, or did he just get another face-lift?"

"Oh." Del grinned. "You musta saw the new commercials."

"Who could miss them? They're on *Law & Order* reruns every night, right after the first wisecrack. Still using that 'Liti-Nation' jingle and 1-800-SUE-THEM."

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"Keeps working," Del grunted, "so they stick with it."

"The go-go girls, though—that's something new."

"Keeps the slobs watching."

"I resemble that remark."

He winked. "Should have been at the auditions. Ooh la-la."

"Knowing Arnie Junior, I'm figuring he auditioned them himself in person."

Del laughed, leaned closer to me, exhaled smoke. "Funny part is somebody dimed him to his wife. From then on she sat in on every single shoot. Never let Arnie out of her sight." He took another swig of beer, taking the mug below halfway. "But I shouldn't be talking about it."

"And he wants to be called Ted, not Arnie."

"Right, right."

I took a pull at my beer, at my cigar, and at my beer again. The lounge was dark and less than half full. No other patron was within twenty feet of us. I figured that Del, squishy to begin with, was sufficiently softened up. "You guys have a case—big Tier 1 outfit, Stone Automotive? Wrongful death deal, one of their workers."

Del kind of leaned back, sad-puppy eyes on me. "Maybe, maybe not. You know I can't—"

"Del! Please!" I tapped ash in the ashtray. "Who just bought you a beer, huh? And who's about to— Watch this." I raised a hand toward the bar, gave the high sign. The server nodded. "There. Refill on the way. I buy you beer, you help me out. Fair deal?"

He looked pained. "Just so you keep it quiet."

"Of course."

He leaned closer again. "Yeah, their dumb-ass maintenance guy got mangled in a machine. His widow's suing."

"Monrho, J. J.? Wife's name Faith?"

"Yeah, that's right, Monrho, funny spelling." The beers arrived. I put a twenty on the table. Del wasn't quite as much in the bag as I had hoped. He'd built up more resistance in the intervening years. And maybe some spine? Could I be that unlucky? "What's your interest, Ben?"

"Oh, just some chats that got had. Lawyer pal was telling me about 'consortium,' and this Monrho case came up."

"Consorsh . . ." Del tried.

I waved a hand. "I don't understand it myself. But supposedly, the widow, when her husband died she lost consortium? So she's suing for that?"

Del waved both big hands. "That's way above my pay grade."

"Mine too. But the interesting part is this victim, the maintenance

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guy—what I'm hearing is, he had a girlfriend on the side. Which means his wife had no consortium to lose."

Del stubbed out his cigarette and fetched a fresh one. I lighted it for him. He nodded thanks, inhaling, then said, "Happens a lot."

"So did he? For real?"

"I don't know."

"Del! Please! This is me!"

"I can't say nothin'."

"Come on. It's just between us girls."

"Ted would strangle me."

"That cream puff? You could take him easy."

He drew up. "You betcha. But it's not about taking him. It's about keeping my frickin' job."

"No one's losing any job."

"I'm not like you, Ben. I've got a bad past to live down."

"Bad past? Hell, man. I used to throw guys down stairs for a living."

"But see, that was union, that was okay. My stuff was . . . well . . . these days I gotta maintain absolute top eth—ethli—ethical standards."

"All the same, you and me, Del, what we are, is like . . . brothers. Guys like us help each other out."

He was shaking his head. "No way, man. Sorry."

I sighed and eyed him. He avoided my look, fiddling with his cigarette, pulling at his beer. Finally, he looked me dead-on and said, "What?"

"I hate to bring up—"

"What?"

"About who hooked you up with the Coyne Cose gig in the first place."

"I *said* I was grateful," he said sourly.

"I'm sure not feeling the love now."

"We got rules, Ben."

"And I'd hate to bring up that old Willow Run business."

"Oh! This again!"

"About whose fat got pulled out of the fire in just the nick of frickin' time."

"I wasn't fat back then."

"I took a chair to the head while you skedaddled for the—"

"You had to bring this up! You just had to!"

"Del. Please. You're the one forcing my hand."

With short savage strokes he jammed his cigarette out in the loaded ashtray. "This was such a good day," he moaned, "till you had to go and show up."

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I slid a little closer and lowered my voice. "You got my word," I said, making the sign of the cross in front of my lips, "this goes absolutely nowhere further. The chick the late Mr. J. J. Monrho was dallying with? Just give me her name."

Joy Monrho's address, obtained for me off the Internet by Shyla Ryan, turned out to be in Lincoln Park, an older, tucked-away suburb just southwest of Detroit. Her imposing brick colonial was in a surprisingly attractive subdivision of similar houses that squatted large on their smallish treed lots. It was five thirty by the time I parked my '71 Mustang half a block up. To sit, and watch, and think.

Because I had no business being here. None.

My sole assignment, after all, was to get the name of the woman with whom J. J. Monrho, deceased husband of Micki's client, was allegedly having an affair. So all I had to do now was get Micki on the horn, give her my report, and go about my business. And I would have, except for what Del Laing had said to me after coughing up the name.

"Watch out, Ben. This broad is bad, bad, bad news."

"What do you mean, Del?"

"She's just plain evil."

"Hey," I said, rising from the booth, "you keep talking her up like this, I might propose to her."

"This ain't funny. Take it from me. And what makes her so scary is how good she is at hiding her true self. People who know her, they think she's this sweet, quiet, proper, respectable, solid-citizen-type woman."

"How do you know she isn't?"

He put a big paw on his heart and looked at me with his droopy sad-puppy eyes. "I know the signs. I can smell 'em a mile away. I was married to one just like her."

"Thanks anyhow, Del."

"You'll see," he called as I headed for the lounge exit. "I learned the hard way over ninety-one hundred eighty-five days. You'll see!"

A fairly new silver Impala sat in the driveway. Some lights shone inside. I was getting hungry. This was not, after all, a paying case. I needed to pick Rachel up from day care soon. Fortunately, that was in Plymouth, over a piece and yonder a way. I had a few minutes, and I was here.

And I just had to check this out for myself. J. J. Monrho had been having an affair with—of all the women in all the gin joints in metro Detroit—his ex?

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Who does that?

The big door with its half-moon window pulled open seconds after I rang. The woman was of average height and build with short, wavy, chocolate hair and middle-aged plain Jane looks except for her eyes, which were large and a startling shade of green. She wore dressy jeans and a blue chambray shirt with Smarr & Daft embroidered in red over the pocket. Her posture was guarded, but not overly so. She was comfortable in her home and in her skin. "Yes?"

"Hi. Joy Monrho?" She nodded. "I'm Harv O'Gannon, from Coyne Cose?"

She blinked and made an embarrassed half-smile. "Yes?"

After a moment, I chuckled. "You weren't expecting me, were you?"

"I'm afraid not."

I glanced down at the small pad in my hand and shook my head. "Our office girl, she's kind of new," I said, doing my best aw-shucks. "I had a sneaking suspicion maybe she didn't confirm with you. One of those annoying logistical foul-ups."

"What's this about?"

"Well, I have the report from Del Laing, and we need to lock down all the details."

"Oh," she said, honestly puzzled. "I thought . . . Mr. Bumpps said he was through with me till the deposition."

Deposition? "Of course," I said. "But before that we want to be sure we have all the facts. So there are no surprises."

"I see."

She was obviously on the bubble. I could try a good hard push, but something told me to go for broke the other way. Might as well—I really had nothing to lose. "You know what, this is just plain awkward," I said, snapping my notebook shut. "We'll call and set up another time. Sorry I troubled you."

"No, it's all right," she said, quietly calm. "We can talk now, if it won't take too long." She smiled briefly. "Please come in."

Good old Perkins, I thought. All smooth masculine charm. What's this about evil? Joy Monrho obviously had excellent taste and judgment.

She led me into the living room, from which the street was visible through a large bay window. The room was overly full with heavy, ugly, and uncomfortable-looking Early American furniture. Framed photographs decked the walls and horizontal surfaces. The low glass-topped coffee table was piled with photo albums and magazines. Joy Monrho sat at the end of the sofa and I took

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the club chair kitty-corner to her right. "So as I understand it," I began, "you were married to J. J. Monrho."

"Twelve years."

"And then divorced."

"Six years ago."

"But you two, uh, kept *seeing* each other."

"That's right."

"Even after J. J. married Faith."

"Correct." No self-consciousness in her response. No defensiveness either.

"Which was—when did they marry?"

"A year ago Christmas."

And, I reflected, J. J. died three months later, just a year ago. Joy sat there, one jeaned leg crossed over the other, arms loosely folded. Her demeanor was calm, her tone willing. She was looking not at me, but past me, expression reflective, bemused. She was, by God, enjoying this—*enjoying* the act of telling the story. I jotted some dates in my notebook. "A little bit unconventional."

She shrugged and smiled a bit secretive and, I thought, borderline smug. "There wasn't much conventional about J. J. and me, Mr. O'Gannon. We married way too young. We broke up dozens of times. But we always reunited."

"Even after the divorce."

"Yes."

"And even after he remarried."

She shifted. "He swore off me a dozen times. I knew all I had to do was wait. Within three days of his 'wedding,'" and she made quote marks with her fingers, "he was with me again, same as ever."

"Sounds like he was pretty obsessed with you."

She shrugged. "We were soul mates. Meant only for each other. Despite the difficulties."

"You kept his name, I notice."

"It's *my* name," she said with quiet pride.

Smug was the word, all right. Joy Monrho just plain loved it that this man could never just be done with her once and for all. That I could understand. What was not so understandable was the apparent lack of grief that she exhibited. There was no sign that she mourned this "soul mate" who had been cruelly taken from her.

I shifted gears. "So how did it work? What was your, uh, routine with him?"

"He came here Thursday evenings for," she arched a brow, "dinner."

"Every single Thursday?"

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"Just about. And we met for lunch a couple of times a week too, usually."

"Where?"

Her eyes narrowed briefly. "Why does that matter?"

"Please understand: The plaintiffs are going to attack your story. We need for it to be bulletproof."

"Well, it was a Waffle Wagon about halfway between the scrap yard and the plant."

"The scrap yard is where you work?"

"Yes."

"And the Waffle Wagon is where again?"

"The Boulevard, just south of the Ford Freeway. Listen," she said earnestly, "if what you need is evidence we were still together—I can help with that."

"Okay," I said doubtfully. "What do you got?"

From the lower shelf of the coffee table she brought up a couple of leather-bound picture albums. Opening the first, she spun it to face me. The eight by ten showed a smallish sailboat with two people on it. One was Joy, looking pretty fine in a two-piece yellow swimsuit.

"And that's J. J.," I said, pointing, gambling a little—but she'd probably expect that I knew what the man looked like.

"Yes. That was Labor Day weekend. He died the following March."

"Which was . . . how long after he married Faith?"

"Well, as of Labor Day he hadn't married her yet. But they were 'engaged.' " Again with the finger-quote marks.

I looked at her. She was quite calm, impassive, unreadable. "You didn't mind?"

"Of course I minded. But I was sure his . . . dalliance with her would run its course."

"Instead, he married her."

She shrugged. "Some dalliances run longer than others."

"And you kept on with him."

"Yes." She flipped some more picture pages.

"So you didn't mind being the other woman."

"I'm not the other woman," she said without looking at me. "*She* is the other woman." It occurred to me that Joy had not once uttered Faith's name. She tapped the book. "Look at this one." The group shot showed probably twenty people, all dressed for holiday revelry. "This was the New Year's Eve party for J. J.'s work. Three months before he died." She pointed to a couple in the center. "There we are," she said softly.

I looked at his round face—long hair, goatee, big smile. A

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cheerful-looking, bang-about good-old-boy type, and behind that grin, such secrets. "And he married Faith when? Just a few days before this?"

"Yes." Turning a few more pages, she showed me a few more pictures, mostly of the two of them, riding bicycles, sitting out on her deck, cuddled up on the couch on which she now sat. I realized that many of the pictures on display in that living room were of J. J. Monrho also. There were more of them than I'd thought. Quite a lot, in fact. Almost to the point of making this room a shrine to him.

"Check this out," she said, picking up a plastic badge that had been tucked in the album. It was credit-card sized, thickly laminated, with a long, red neck fob. On it was imprinted the well known Stone Automotive logo, the name *Monrho J.*, and some kind of serial number. "His plant badge."

"How'd you get this?"

Her smile was small and, for once, warm. "Oh, it sounds so silly. When he was in the Navy—we were just kids then—he gave me his dog tags to wear while he was at sea. It became a sort of tradition with us. So when he got the job at Stone, he conned them into giving him a replacement plant badge. I wore it twenty-four seven, under my clothes. As a way to—" And here Joy Monrho fumbled, for the first and only time during our talk—"keep him close to me."

"But you don't wear it now."

A phone rang faintly, a wall away. Joy's green eyes shifted to me, and then went far away. "Will you excuse me?"

"Sure."

She left. I gazed at the picture album and the plant badge. Keeping that trinket—showing it off—was Joy's way of saying, This is how much he loved me. I wondered how much of all this Micki knew. My bet was not much. I picked up the badge. It was heavier than it looked. I wondered if it had a metal strip in it. I wondered if it was the type of badge, magnetic or whatever, that opened secure doors. I wondered further if the thing still worked.

Thirty seconds later, I was on my feet when Joy returned, extending the wireless phone. "It's for you."

Now, there are times in this work when you need every ounce of your acting ability to keep from blowing yourself out of the water. Since no one was supposed to know I was here—and, by the by, the Harv O'Gannon I was posing as does not exist, except when, like an old shirt from the closet floor, I put him on—this was one of those times. I kept my chin from smacking my chest, if just barely. Control is all. "Thanks." I took the phone. "Hello."

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"Who the hell are you?" growled a male voice.

I snorted. "Well, who's this?"

"According to you, whoever *you* are, I'm your boss!"

Joy Monrho stood off to the side, arms folded, watching me impassively. I gave her a wink. "Oh, hi, Arnie."

"You mean Ted. Mr. Bumpps to you. I got no frickin' O'Gannon working for me. So who the hell are you?"

The latest face-lift notwithstanding, he sounded just the same. I was not surprised he did not recognize my voice. To Arnie Bumpps, guys like me are as disposable as sneeze rags. "I'm just finishing up here. You want my report in person, or should I e-mail it?"

"The cops have been called. Just for your information."

"The Lincoln Park police! Oh no!"

"See you in the pokey."

"Yessir. Bye now." I hit the OFF button. "Arnie's quite the card," I said, handing the phone to Joy.

"He didn't seem to know who you are," she remarked.

"Ahh. Another one of those annoying logistical foul-ups," I said, strolling in the direction of the front door. "I think I'll be going."

"Probably a good idea."

"Bye then."

"Bye."

Like a mountain cat off a tree limb, Micki was on me before the door of my Mustang closed. "Tell me those calls I got last night were just a bad dream. *Tell* me."

"Sorry," I said.

For once Micki's cheeriness had slipped, like a scabbard from a sword, giving a glimpse of gleaming blued steel. "You won't believe how furious Arnie is."

"Play-acting. He's a big strutting, scene-chewing ham, is our Arnie."

"He's threatening to report me to the bar association!"

"Why? You didn't do anything."

"He assumes I sent you to Joy's house under false pretenses!"

"I went off the reservation. I'm known for that."

"And now I'm getting the heat!"

"The dogs bark," I said, "but the caravan moves on." I looked around. The townhouse complex was in Romulus, not far from the airport. It was a beautiful, sunny March morning, the kind of weather that makes places look nicer than they really are. But it didn't do much for this joint. "So Faith lives in this dump somewhere?"

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"Yes," she grumped, "just up the way."

"*This* was where she and J. J. lived?"

"Yes, why?"

"Because jeez. You should see Joy's digs. Flossy."

"J. J. had to pay Joy alimony. It was all he and Faith could do to dig it up every month." Her eyes narrowed. "And you aren't supposed to know what Joy's 'digs' look like, may I remind you." She started up the sidewalk, scowling. "You wanted to talk to Faith, let's go talk to her." As we approached the door of 8619, she asked, "Could you refresh my memory on a point?"

"Why sure."

"Did I ever actually, like, *hire* you for this case?"

"Surprised you don't recall," I said airily. "Of course, at the time, you were running treadmill. Maybe you blanked it all out, overcome by, whatchacallum, dolphins."

"*Endorphins* is the term I believe you're trying to misapply. And I seriously doubt they have any such effect."

"Well, you can't go by me," I admitted. "I'm more into adrenaline and alcohol."

Faith Monrho let us in. We did the introductions and got seated in the smallish living room. It was equipped with mismatched hand-me-downs that, even so, imparted a homey, comfortable feel. Faith was older than Joy by a fistful of years, and much taller, five eight or nine in her bare feet. She wore white pants and a white top, which made her either a nurse or a clerk at Baskin Robbins. Her black hair was cut in a thick shoulder length shag, and her blue eyes peered at us through rimless glasses. Some kind of classical piano music played from the next room, probably WHJR. Faith seemed not to notice. She did not seem to be fully with us, either.

". . . Some information that he's gathered," Micki said, finishing her introduction. "Ben?"

I took a deep breath. "Ms. Monrho, it's a sad task we're embarked on here. You've been hurt a lot already. Some of what I have to say may cause you more pain. For that I apologize in advance."

"It's all right," she said. Her voice was rich, melodious. I wondered if she'd ever sang. She was pretty, in a regal, stricken sort of way, but from the absence of makeup and female adornment, found it hard to particularly care. "Did you find out who the . . . the other woman is supposed to be?"

Micki reached a hand to her knee. "It's Joy. I am so sorry."

"Joy?" Faith echoed. She blinked, bowed her head, and then shook it. "Can't be true."

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"I talked to her last night," I said. "She laid it all out for me."

"What exactly did she say?"

With a glance at me, Micki said, "I'm not sure it's important to—"

"No." Faith raised her head and stared at us. A single shiny tear gleamed in each eye. "I want to hear it. I want to know what that bitch said about my husband."

"It's like her mainspring's broke, isn't it?" I murmured.

"Yes," Micki said quietly.

We were back out in the parking lot. I leaned against the fender of my Mustang, smoking a short, cork-tipped cigar. "Like she can't stand up fully straight," I said. "Walking wounded."

"It's been a year," Micki, deliberately upwind from me, said. She was dressed for court in a navy suit, a cluster of gold chains adorning her neck. "You'd think she'd be recovering."

"My ex, Raeanne, she had a lot of experience with this stuff—she said a lot of times it takes a full year for it to even really hit."

"Wow," Micki murmured. "Well. At least Faith gave us some things to work with."

"Some leads, anyhow. But what we got here is some kinda she-said she-said, huh?"

"Yes. Except, from what you say, Joy would seem to have evidence. Which means we need some."

I looked at her, bending a little to make direct eye contact. "Is that your way of saying I'm on the payroll now?"

"If you can follow instructions."

"Your druthers is my ruthers, like my daddy used to say."

"I mean *to the letter*."

"Now that's overreaching. What I do is meet objectives. Hit targets. With ordnance, if necessary."

Micki looked at me sourly, rolled her eyes, released a big sigh. "I could just replace you. But we're probably in too deep for that."

"You're gonna give me a fat head, those kinds of glowing endorsements."

"And this deposition is coming up quick."

"Why the deposition? I don't get it."

"It's a tactic. Like throwing down a glove. They get Joy's version on the record, it puts the settlement negotiations on a different playing field, whether we like it or not."

God, I was glad I didn't have her job. "Okay."

Micki paced the sidewalk, considering. "I'll move for a postponement. You get rolling. Full court press. What're you going after first? The Waffle Wagon?"

"Forget the Offal Wagon. I mean, the one Joy mentioned is

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where she said it is. And it is in fact halfway between her work and his. But that kinda place, nobody there'll remember squat about them."

"You're probably right. What about the scrap yard where she works?"

"What about it? She's their health and safety supervisor. Been there for years. Big whoop."

"So . . . the Thursday night issue then?"

"Reckon so."

"Do that, then report back to me."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Before you proceed. Before you do *anything* else."

I grinned. "Yazz'm," I drawled, and swung in behind the wheel of my Mustang, the plant badge burning a hole in my pocket.

The church was in Livonia, set well back from one of those nameless mile roads, its stained-glass front dark in the shadows of the setting sun. I circled the parking lot till I found a cluster of cars, where I parked. Directly across was an unmarked door, with several nondescript people standing around chatting and smoking cigarettes. As I watched, others arrived. There was much handshaking and hugging, and a lot of cutting up and laughing. I wondered if I was at the right place. But this was where Faith had sent me, and this was Thursday evening. So I got out of the Mustang.

People glanced at me as I approached the door. They ranged in age from teens to septuagenarians. When I'm at a bit of a loss, which on this job I am quite often, I tend to just bull on ahead. So I stopped by a pair of matronly ladies and asked, "Can you point me to the group chairman?"

"I guess that's Rose," one of them said.

"She's downstairs," the other added.

"I'm Mary," the first one added. "Welcome."

"Thanks," I said, and went inside.

Downstairs turned out to be some sort of Sunday School room. Classroom tables were arranged in a U, and a dozen or so people—adults—were already seated. At the front, posters stood on easels, headed twelve something and twelve something else. An elderly woman, with upswept gray hair and excellent clothes, was setting books out on the tables and chatting easily with others. I went to her. "Are you Rose?"

"Yes?" she answered, turning, a big welcoming smile wreathing her lived-in face.

"I'm Ben. Word with you?"

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"Hi, Ben. Certainly." We stepped over to a piano near the corner. "What can I do for you?"

I took a deep breath. "I'm sure you'll have issues with this, but I need help. It's about a former member."

"Former?" she asked. She arched a brow, gave me the once-over. "Are you a cop?"

"No. Private. Working for the widow of a man who she says was a member here."

"Oh," she said guardedly. "What was his first name?"

"Went by J. J." She did not react. "First name was Jeff."

She smiled. "We are awash in Jeffs."

"Listen, Rose. If I show you a picture, could you at least tell me if he was a member?"

She thought it over. "If he is really dead. And if I knew him. I suppose so."

"And if the answer is yes . . . maybe some details."

"Depends on the details," she said. But the glint in her eye was mischievous.

"Okay. Here comes the picture."

Like the good boy I occasionally am, I dutifully reported the results to Micki Quick. But by the next day it was time for another trip off the reservation.

The appointment hadn't been hard to set up. I just called the Stone Automotive plant in Melvindale, asked for the director of maintenance, and said I needed to ask him some informal questions about the death of his predecessor, J. J. Monrho. Which of course was completely untrue. That ground had been tilled to death already. My real purpose was to get inside the plant, shake loose somehow, and snoop around.

Ike Watt met me in the lavish plant foyer. He had me sign a guest registry that included my name, address, date of birth, and citizenship. He had me sign a slip of paper about Stone Automotive's environmental policy, in which I promised to report hazardous substances, to recycle, and not to drill holes in the polar ice cap. He stuck a VISITOR sticker on my shirt, bright red, like a bull's-eye. Several cameras, not so carefully hidden in plastic bubbles in the corners of the foyer, took my picture from several different angles. Those shots would go well, I thought, with the videos taken of me earlier in the parking lot by cameras mounted on light poles. "Need a palm print?" I asked Watt, as he used his plant badge—just like the one in my pocket—to activate the door exiting the foyer. "Or a retinal scan?"

Watt chuckled easily and led me down a wide, picture-flanked

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hallway as the security door clicked shut behind us. "Nuts with guns," he said vaguely. He was an inch or two taller than me, a light-skinned African American, with dark friendly eyes and salt-and-pepper hair and just the lilting hint of New Orleans in his voice. "To look at you," he said, "my guess is you've done some years on the shop floor."

"In my youth," I admitted. "The Rouge. You?"

"Dodge Main, then Dearborn Assembly, then drove hi-lo at Clark Street till it closed." We shook calloused hands, grinned at each other. "I was shift supervisor here till J. J. passed. Then they moved me over to his job. We're in here." He opened an unmarked door and led me in. The long and well-appointed conference room sat twenty easily. But now there were but three, all suits. Two I did not know, and one I did, standing at the head of the table, glowering: Arnold "Ted" Bumpps, attorney at law—or "Esquire," as they style themselves.

"Oh my," I said. "The star of stage and scream."

Bumpps was well fed and swarthy with slick dark hair combed back and coarsely handsome features. His dark pinstriped suit was flawless. His smile was steely. "Caught ya, Perkins. Or are you O'Gannon?"

"Howdy, Arnie. Or are you Ted?"

He scowled. "State your business."

"Here to chat with Ike, was the plan."

"Without counsel present? In your dreams. Have a seat."

As the men pushed business cards across to me, I maintained my bluff brave front, but inside I knew my mission was toast. Given the stakes in this case, I should have figured that Arnie would have the Stone operation on total lockdown. Even so, I went through the motions. In response to my questions Ike Watt explained yet again the circumstances of J. J. Monrho's death. How early one morning last March, before the start of first shift, he had gone inside the monster machine press to do some sort of maintenance—without locking it out first. The area team leader had come along and, without realizing J. J. was inside, started the press up. Nothing new or different from what Micki had related to me before.

"So there's no company negligence here," Bumpps declared. "They long ago implemented appropriate lockout-tagout procedures. Did all the training; we have the records. Monrho clearly should have known better. He either forgot or . . . just cut a corner that morning."

I closed my notebook, in which I'd done a doodle or two just for show, and rose. "That's it then. I'll get out of your hair."

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"You escort him all the way to his car, Watt," Arnie said. "Make sure he signs out. Relieve him of his visitor tag. And don't let him out of your sight."

Ike gave me a slow, inscrutable glance. I just looked back at him.

"Yazzuh," Ike drawled, with sarcasm that Arnie, in his terminal self-absorption, had not a prayer in the world of catching. We left the conference room and headed back the way we'd come. In a low voice Watt asked, "Did you get what you needed?"

"You kidding?"

"This wasn't my doing," he said, even softer. "The heat on this thing is incredible." We reached a hallway intersection. "Wait here a minute," he said. "I'll be right back." He went up the side hall a ways and ducked into what I assumed was a restroom. I dawdled in the main hallway, keeping myself out of trouble by looking over the commemorative plaques and award certificates and employee group pictures that lined the walls. All pretty boring, till I got to a larger one in the middle. It was headed "Ford Q-1 Certification 1988." The workers were arranged in two rows, all wearing Stone Automotive uniforms. In the center of the front row was J. J. Monrho, grinning, with goatee and longish hair. That didn't surprise me. What surprised me was who posed behind him and to his right. Also in plant uniform, making a formal self-conscious smile, with dark brown, tightly permed hair compressed under a yellow hard hat with EHS printed above its bill.

Joy Monrho.

Ike had not returned. I had a feeling he was not going to. I thought about my options. There really was just one more thing I needed to check. I went through the door to the foyer, closed it behind me, and looked around. No one was watching. With my back to the door I fished Joy Monrho's plant badge out of my pocket and swept it past the activation pad. In response, the door latch snicked.

Bingo.

Quickly, I left. I did not sign out and I did not return my visitor tag. That'll show them. Safe behind the wheel of my Mustang, I fished the business cards out of my pocket, flipped through them, and then dialed a number on my cell. Come on, answer, *answer*.

"Hello?" came Ike Watt's easygoing voice.

"What does EHS stand for?" I asked.

"Perkins?"

"Do you know?"

"Sure I know. Environmental-Health-Safety."

I took a deep breath. "Question two. Where's the plant saloon?"

"Beg pardon?"

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"C'mon. There's got to be one."

"Uh . . . The Pour House. Dix Road, just this side of Schaefer."

"Okay. No lawyers. Just you and me, two old shop-floor men. Half hour?"

"Sure." He hesitated. "Don't know how much I can help you."

"Not to worry. I suspect it's me that'll be helping you."

Micki called me back just as Ike pulled into the Pour House parking lot in his midnight blue Topkick. "Don't postpone the deposition," I told her.

"But it's scheduled for Monday! How can we—"

"We'll be ready. We'll do good. Trust me," I said, fingers crossed hard.

The Coyne Cose conference room—my second such in four days—occupied a corner of their suite on the twenty-ninth floor of the main Town Center skyscraper in Southfield. Micki Quick, in a Ferrari-red suit, met me by its open double doors, briefcase in one hand and bowling ball bag in the other. She took me aside. "Everything set?"

"Yeah, my guy'll be here any minute." At least I thought he would. Art had never let me down. "You got everything?"

She hefted the bowling ball bag. "I feel like an idiot!' she whispered fiercely.

"Well, what're you gonna do," I drawled. "What about the Melvindale crew?"

"They'll be here in an hour."

"You locked and loaded?"

For such a pretty woman, her smile was anything but. "This'll be *fun*."

"We're ready," came a female voice from just inside the double doors. Inside, at one end of the gleaming mahogany conference table, sat Joy Monrho, dark hair well coifed and squarish plain-Jane face placid of expression as always. She wore a sort of mud-colored cardigan over a black shirt. At the opposite end sat her opposite number, Faith Monrho, in whites and a hospital badge and heavy, dark-framed glasses. Her gaze was out the broad windows at the flat metro Detroit cityscape. Joy, on the other hand, was watching her successor, thinking only God knew what.

Arnie Bumpps, in full dark-suited Mafiosi mode, bustled in with his retinue, like a gander amid a flotilla of goslings, and seated himself protectively next to Joy. Halfway down the table, with her back to the windows, perched over a little steno machine on a tripod, sat a harried looking woman in a dark blue suit. "If we could begin," she intoned. "We are now on the record."

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Micki and I sat at Faith's end, flanking her. One of Arnie's crew closed the double doors. The blue-suited woman said, "I am Maren Bickers, licensed court reporter and notary public for the county of Oakland, state of Michigan, under contract to Coyne Cose et al. Today's proceeding is in re Monrho versus the Triangle Group LLP, d/b/a Stone Automotive. Case number DM-44510. We are here to take the testimony of one Joy B. Monrho, testifying for the defense. Which of you would be Joy B. Monrho?" Joy raised her left hand, no doubt deliberately, to show off her wedding rings. "Picture ID, please." Obviously prepped, Joy slid over her driver's license. After inspection, Bickers said, "Now raise your *right* hand, please."

As Bickers administered the oath, a tapping came at the double doors. Bumpps's doorkeeper, a whip-thin twenty-something with spiky black hair, leaned out, then turned and beckoned me. I slipped over there to see the squat, balding Art Drinkard hovering in the hallway. He handed me a big padded envelope, slightly damp from the sweat of his hand. "All set. Just hit ON," he wheezed.

"Thanks, pal." The conference room was silent as I went back to my seat. "Sorry, folks," I said.

"For the record, I wish to object," Arnie Bumpps blared, "to the presence of Ben Perkins at this proceeding."

"Come on, Arnie—er—Ted," Micki said, smiling. "He works for me. And look at him—he's cleaned up pretty good."

A titter sounded in the room. Bumpps's scowl was fixed. "I respectfully ask the court to take official judicial notice that Perkins has, during the discovery process, acted in a fraudulent and deceptive manner toward my witness here."

Woo, was I scared. "So noted," Bickers intoned, fingers fluttering almost silently on the steno machine keys. "If that's all, Mr. Bumpps, you may begin your direct."

"He used to work for me, you know. I fired his sorry ass out of here years ago."

Bickers's fingers fluttered a bit more. Then she paused and gazed down at Bumpps. "Feel free to continue, counselor. Like you, I'm paid by the hour."

Now here was a chick to like. I tried not to laugh. Micki beamed. Faith smiled briefly. Bumpps's entourage stirred, and the spike-haired man by the door hissed, "Ted!" Arnie rose to his feet and blared, "May we begin."

Joy Monrho's direct examination went pretty much the way we expected. Arnie led her through her courtship with J. J., their wedding, their marriage. They reviewed the fights, the separations,

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the reunions. Joy owned up to three affairs, one just before their wedding and two after. She would not comment on J. J.'s fidelity record, insisting, with a quiet tear and trembling chin, that the memory of the deceased be untarnished. She was something, all right. Utterly credible. Yet she seemed a bit distanced, too, as if on a mild sedative.

The bulk of the time was spent on the five years between their divorce and his death. She recounted the informal if continuous extension of their relationship. And, under Bumpps's labored questioning, she went into great detail about their together-time before and after his marriage to Faith. She showed the pictures I'd seen at her house, which were admitted as evidence. She described the phone calls, the e-mails, the weekday lunches. And she detailed the Thursday evening trysts, in terms that teetered on an R rating.

"It is your contention, then," Bumpps said, addressing his witness but casting a glare down the table at us, "that J. J. Monrho, matrimonial technicalities notwithstanding, derived his physical and emotional comfort *not* from the plaintiff in this case, the putative wife, but in actuality of fact from *you*, Mrs. Monrho."

"Objection," Micki said quietly, speaking up for the first time. "Counsel is leading his own witness. And calling for a conclusion. Using run-on sentences. And whatever else."

"So noted," Bickers murmured.

"Yes," Joy Monrho answered. "In every way that matters, I remained J. J.'s wife. And will be, till the day I die."

"Thank you, Mrs. Monrho." Arnie grinned at us. "That's all I have."

Bickers typed a bit more, then sat back. "Let's take ten. We're off the record."

People moved about. Arnie bent down and gave Joy a big hug, causing her to squint. Faith, Micki, and I stood to stretch, and I bent to Micki's ear. "I thought you'd decided not to object to anything. No point."

"I just could not stand it," she muttered.

As for Faith, her long face behind her heavy black glasses was a mix of sadness and anger. "How dare she say those things," she whispered shakily. "First she made his life a hell on earth all those years. Then she drove him out. And now she wants to hurt him and me further—by claiming he cheated on me, with her as the other woman."

Micki took her arm reassuringly. "Hang in there," she said quietly.

" 'Matrimonial technicalities.' "

"Yes."

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" 'Putative wife.' "

"I know, I know."

Faith looked at me. "Didn't I hear you used to beat people up for a living?"

"Just her? Or Arnie too?"

"Now stop it," Micki said. "And be patient. It's our turn at bat."

"But what can you *do*?" Faith asked. "It's . . . it's my word against—"

"Just relax. It'll be okay."

Faith sat back down. Micki glanced at me. We had argued about how much to tell Faith. In the end, over Micki's misgivings, we'd decided to keep our gal pretty much in the dark. We wanted her reactions during the deposition to be absolutely natural, so that no one would be tipped off. Now I was glad. Arnie, with his tin ear and eyes blinded in the glare of his own ego, was no problem. But not everyone on his team was so clueless. "The spike-hair," I murmured to Micki.

"Right." She remained standing at our end of the table, slight and resolute in her bright red suit, tiny oval glasses perched halfway down her nose. A manila folder of papers sat in front of her. People returned to the table, the spike-haired man closed the conference room doors, and Maren Bickers resumed her place behind the steno machine. I sat in my chair, trying not to fidget or yawn. I'm an action kind of guy, born and bred. For me, nothing was more dreary than sitting around a conference table for what seemed like hours and hours. And—though I'd spent a ton of weekend hours sorting this out with Micki, my work here was pretty much done.

But, though I really didn't know for sure how it would all play out, I was, of course, staying. If there was a kill to be in on, I wanted in.

Maren Bickers said: "We're back on the record. Counselor?"

"Thank you," Micki said. "Ms. Joy Monrho: Good morning."

"Hello," Joy replied. "Please address me as *Missus* Monrho."

"I am Micheline A. Quick, counsel for the plaintiff." She glanced at Bickers. "P–827320."

"So noted," Bickers murmured.

"And I'd like to take you back, if you please, to the sailboat you told us about."

"Yes."

"And the picture you showed us. Defense three, I believe? Ms. Bickers?" The reporter flipped through the marked exhibits and leaned the picture on a little tabletop easel so we could all see it.

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"Thank you," Micki said. "This picture was taken when, Ms. Monrho?"

"I'm not positive."

"Well, you seemed quite positive during your direct questioning."

Joy shrugged. "I can't be sure."

"Please read back the deponent's earlier response," Micki said to the reporter. Bickers, after a pause, said, " 'Summer of 2003.' "

"Can you be more specific?" Micki asked Joy.

"I don't keep minute by minute track of things."

"Well, then. Perhaps this will help." Micki took a sheet of paper out of the folder and handed it to Bickers. "Plaintiff's Exhibit One, please."

"So noted." Bickers slid the paper down the table. Arnie Bumpps, scowling, pawed it over to himself.

"This is a bill of sale," Micki said. "By means of which J. J. Monrho sold the boat to one Zaneta Rozalska. Would you please read the date on the bill of sale, Ms. Monrho?"

Joy squinted at the paper. "June 8, 2000." She shrugged. "Obviously I was off by a bit."

"And as long as we're talking dates," Micki said, "would you remind us please— When did you and J. J. divorce?"

"Ninety-nine," she said shortly. "September."

"Thank you."

"And I object to this entire exchange," Arnie blared. He waved the bill of sale disdainfully. "This could have been trumped up on any word processor. It utterly lacks credibility."

"So noted," Bickers said, typing.

"Ms. Rozalska is available to testify," Micki said, "if it comes to that. Which I doubt. Let's move on." I noticed that Arnie was sitting a bit closer to Joy now, looming, protective, grinning like he'd won something. Spikes, over by the door, was watching Micki speculatively. He knew that the bill of sale had been nothing but a soft lob. "Now. These Thursday night dates," Micki said, "that you described in such lascivious detail."

"I object to the characterization," Arnie said.

"So noted."

"Oh, all right, withdrawn," Micki said. "In any event, Ms. Monrho— isn't it a fact that your late ex-husband was a recovering alcoholic?"

Joy's eyes averted. "No," she said. "Not really."

"Didn't he join Alcoholics Anonymous? Two years before you and he divorced?"

"No!" Joy said, indignant now. "He wasn't a drunk. He liked to drink, but—"

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"And these Thursday nights of his— Wasn't that when he attended regular meetings of his AA home group?"

Spikes, by the door, said, with an annoyed glance at Arnie, "We object. No basis for this line of questioning in our direct."

"On the contrary," Micki said. "Deponent, under the guidance of Brother Bumpps, dwelled at considerable length on the deceased Mr. Monrho's personality traits."

"So noted."

From her folder Micki took out a small brown envelope and slid it over to Bickers. "Plaintiff's Two. Ms. Monrho, if you would, please examine these." Bickers slid the envelope down. Joy opened it and out clanked several heavy brass, half-dollar-sized medallions. Micki said, "Tell us what those are?"

With gingerly fingers, Joy arrayed them on the gleaming tabletop. "I don't know."

"Would it surprise you to learn they are gifts from J. J.'s AA group? They commemorate his years of sobriety. What's the Roman numeral on the darkest one there?"

"X."

"Ten years," Micki said. "Isn't it a fact that, prior to your divorce, your husband kept these coins on the top of his dresser in your bedroom?"

Joy snorted. "I never saw them."

"And this," Arnie sputtered, "none of this . . . I object. I sincerely object. These 'coins' could have come from anywhere. And even if they were his, they are still not evidence that J. J. Monrho was not with my client on all those Thursday nights."

"Your *witness*," Bickers murmured.

"Pardon me?"

"Ted," Spikes said, shaking his head.

"Ms. Joy Monrho is your witness," Maren Bickers said to Arnie. "Not your client."

Impossible to embarrass, Arnie just shrugged. "Strike that. I misspoke."

With a short dismissive gesture, Joy pushed the coins and envelope back toward Bickers, who secured them. Micki remained in place, watching Joy with a look of, well, call it curiosity. I would not have wanted to be Joy at that moment. It was impossible, though, to tell what she was thinking, or how she was feeling. She was that good.

Micki addressed Bickers. "Could you display Defense Five?" Bickers set the picture on the easel. It was the group shot of party revelers that Joy had shown me at her house. "Ms. Monrho," Micki

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said: "Please remind us of the occasion on which this picture was taken?"

"New Year's Eve."

"December 31, then?"

"That's when New Year's Eve usually falls."

Micki smiled. "What year?"

Joy calculated. "Oh-three."

"How long before Mr. Monrho died?"

"Three months, about."

"And how long after he married Faith Monrho?"

Joy's green eyes glinted briefly. "Several days."

"Very well. And the occasion of the photograph?"

"It was a party for J. J.'s work."

"Which one is he?"

"That's him. In the center."

Micki extracted something small from her folder and spun it over to Bickers. "I enter this document as Plaintiff's Three. Ms. Monrho, please tell us what it is."

"So noted," Bickers said, and slid it down to Joy. She and Arnie squinted at it. Joy said, "It's his driver's license."

"Whose?"

"J. J.'s."

"All right. And what is the expiration date?"

She studied it for a long time. "July 15, 2004."

"The year he died?"

"Yes."

"And tell us, Ms. Monrho. What is the term of a Michigan driver's license?"

"I'm not sure." She glanced at Arnie. "Four years?"

"Four years," Micki agreed. "Meaning the picture on the license was taken when?"

Mildly irritated, Joy said, "Well, I suppose, 2000 sometime."

"Now Ms. Monrho—please compare the driver's license photo and the party picture. Describe for us the differences in your late ex-husband's appearance."

Which were obvious. In the party picture, J. J. Monrho had very long hair and an elaborate goatee. In the driver's license photo, he was clean-shaven, his head scraped nearly bald. Joy made an indifferent show of looking over the photos. "He changed his look all the time."

"Isn't it a fact," Micki pressed, "that after your 1999 divorce, Mr. Monrho adopted the clean-shaven look in the license photo, and retained it till his death?"

"No, he was always—"

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"Which would mean that the pictures you've shown us—of the party, and the boat—had to have been taken years before the time you are claiming."

"I object."

"So noted."

"I—have told—the truth," Joy said, for the first time showing emotion, if only barely. Anger, barely concealed, churning beneath. "The only lies in all this are being told by you and—that woman."

"Move to strike the deponent's last remark," Micki said.

"So noted."

"Are we done?" Arnie demanded.

"Oh no, Brother Bumpps," Micki said, reaching for her folder. "We are just warming up."

And warm it was. Very. You take all those bodies, all those suits, all that tension—it jacks up the temp, and the humidity too. Ironic, considering how chilly the sunny day was outside the broad windows of that twenty-ninth floor conference room. I was wearing my dark blue blazer, and wishing I could shuck it.

"What is your job, Ms. Monrho?" Micki asked.

"I object," Arnie cut in. "Outside the scope of the direct."

"My colleague opened the door with questions related to the deponent's alleged workday meetings with the deceased."

"So noted."

"They weren't 'alleged' meetings," Joy said. "They really happened."

"And you and J. J. met for the first time on the job, isn't that so?"

"I object. That's outside the scope too."

"Counsel led the witness through a rather labored chronology," Micki said.

"So noted."

"Yes we did," Joy answered. "So?"

"And what company was this?"

"Stone," Joy said readily, as if it meant nothing.

"Stone Automotive," Micki said. "The defendant in this action?"

"Yes."

"Where J. J. Monrho was employed most of his adult life, is that so?"

"It is."

"The plant in Melvindale?"

"Uh, right."

"Where he eventually died."

"Yes. But I quit there. A long time ago."

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"When?"

"Oh . . . years and years ago."

I was dying for Micki to ask why. But she stayed on track. "What was your job at Stone Automotive?"

"I object. Out of the scope of the direct."

"The relevance to the direct will become obvious."

"So noted."

"Ms. Monrho?" Micki prompted.

The woman's squarish face was a mask of puzzlement, but her green eyes were focused and intent. "I don't remember. It was many years ago. Some kind of office job."

"Clerical work."

"Something like that."

Micki opened the folder, took out an item, and scooted it down the table toward Bickers. It was a Stone Automotive plant badge. "Plaintiff's Four," Micki murmured, then asked: "Do you recognize this, Ms. Monrho?"

Joy looked at me with green eyes that were, for just a split-second, enraged. "You took it!" she said, and her tone had no anger at all, just hurt and indignation. To Bumpps she added, "Perkins stole it from me!"

"We object," Arnie Bumpps said, with well-oiled scorn, "to the plaintiff's use of misappropriated property in this proceeding."

"So noted."

"Whose property is this, Ms. Monrho?" Micki asked.

"Mine."

"And whose was it before it was yours?"

"My husband's."

"You're absolutely certain?"

"See, it has his name on it."

"We do note that, for the record."

"It's mine now."

"And you've had it all this time?"

"Yes. And I'm keeping it," Joy said, chin upraised, beringed hands cupping the badge. "It's precious to me. You can put me in jail. But I'm not giving it up."

Arnie started to say something to her, but Micki said: "That's all right. You just hang onto it."

"You're waiving entering it as evidence then?" Bickers asked.

"Yes, that's fine, let her keep her little trinket." Micki bent, reached into the unzipped bowling bag at her feet, and rose. "Let's make *this* Plaintiff's Four," she told Bickers, and slid the yellow plastic hard hat down the table.

All eyes gaped at the thing as it slid to a stop, bill aimed at the

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end, Micki's shot as pretty as if she'd made a seven-ten split. Joy Monrho edged back in her chair, staring. "I don't understand."

"On the contrary," Micki said.

"I object," Arnie sputtered. "Scope of the direct."

"So noted."

"You've never seen this before, Ms. Monrho?"

"I don't know."

"Read us the initials on the bill."

"EHS?"

"What does that stand for?"

"How should I know?"

"One would think you would, ma'am," Micki said, extracting an eight-by-ten photo from her folder. "Plaintiff's Five," she informed Bickers, who put the photo on the easel. It was the plant shot from '88, featuring, among others, the much younger J. J. Monrho and his soon-to-be-wife Joy, making her formal unwilling smile beneath the bill of her yellow hard hat.

"Oh," Joy said. "That."

"So now the fog lifts a bit?" Micki asked.

"I object," Bumpps said, "to this whole, entire line of inquiry. It's wholly irrelevant, impertinent, impermissible. And while we're at it, I object to the counsel's sarcasm."

"So noted."

"Do you now recall what EHS stands for, ma'am?"

"Not exactly."

"Would it surprise you to be reminded that it stands for Environmental-Health-Safety?"

"I guess. Whatever."

"So—just like the scrap yard where you work now—you were in charge of safety at the Stone Automotive plant then, weren't you?"

"Oh, they gave me all kinds of jobs," Joy said, stirred up now, her green eyes hard and glinting. "Stupid thankless jobs. Girl jobs. Paperwork and training and books to keep up. They gave me that job because I had a cute figure. The OSHA inspectors liked me. I hated it. Just hated it."

"And you just finally had your fill of it, didn't you?"

"Yes. One day I just marched out."

"Marched right out."

"Absolutely."

"And never went back."

"Not ever," Joy said, with steely satisfaction, "not even once. J. J. could keep working there if he wanted to. He was a *man*, they treated him *right*. But I never again darkened that building's door."

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Oh, man. Was this a gift or what. Micki had played her right into the tightest of corners, and Joy had no clue. Neither did Arnie. Nor could they, really, because Micki hadn't slammed the door yet. Spikes, though—the skinny gent in black, by the door—he sensed something. He drifted over to Arnie's end of the table, eyes on us.

Micki stood with arms folded and looked down the table over her little spectacles at Joy. "Please explain to us, Ms. Monrho, what 'lockout-tagout' is."

"Object," Arnie snapped. "This witness has no knowledge of—"

"But of course she does, Brother Bumpps," Micki said. "At her current job, she is the safety coordinator. At Stone, her role was similar. The question must be answered."

"She can answer," Arnie said sourly. "What do I care? By the time the judge gets done ruling on my objections, Sister Quick, your cross will end with 'Hi! I'm Micki!' "

His rude condescending tone made my fists knot. Micki stiffened, let out a breath, shook her head. "Let's move on," she said, remarkably steady. "Ms. Monrho? Lockout-tagout?"

"It's hard to explain," Joy said.

"If you take us along in tiny baby steps, we'll try real hard to understand."

Joy shifted. "When a machine needs repair or adjustment or other work, lockout-tagout is a process for securing it. To prevent the release of hazardous energy, thereby protecting the safety of the people working on the machine."

"Very good! Thank you! Were you not, in fact, a lockout-tagout instructor while you were at Stone?"

"No."

"No? We have records."

"Oh," Joy said, waving a hand, "half their paperwork was fakes."

Spikes, standing at Arnie's shoulder now, spoke up. "We need a recess."

"That sounds good," Bickers agreed.

Faith Monrho suddenly put a hand on Micki's arm and stared wide-eyed up into her face. Micki patted her once, and winked. "We're just about finished," Micki said. "Five more minutes."

"I don't want to stop now," Arnie growled. "Let's just wrap this farce up."

"*Ted*," said Spikes.

"Five more minutes and we're done," Micki pressed.

"I agree with counsel," Arnie said. "Let's finish this and get the hell out of here."

A murmuring had built in the conference room. Now it ceased. Spikes, looking openly disgusted, moved back to the wall, arms

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folded. Micki reached for the Stone Automotive plant badge from Bickers. "Ms. Monrho," Micki said to Joy. "You've sworn under oath that this badge is your property."

"Yes."

"All right. Were you aware, madam, that every time a badge like this is used, it leaves a unique digital signature?"

Joy's brow furrowed. After a long silence, she said, "I wouldn't know either way."

"Every time. So if you would: Tell us where you were on February 25, 2004."

"I don't know. Work probably."

"March 10?"

"Could have been work, I don't know."

"And March 22, 2004?" Joy did not answer. Just stared. Micki asked quietly, "What is the significance of that date, Ms. Monrho?"

A tear formed at the corner of one green eye. "The day the love of my life died."

"Do you remember where you were that day?"

"Of course. I remember every minute."

"So you do recall going to the Melvindale plant very early that morning."

She hesitated, then snapped: "No!"

Micki dropped the badge on the tabletop. "That's puzzling. Because this badge, this precious keepsake of yours—this badge was there on that date, ma'am. This badge registered in the plant's computer at four sixteen A.M."

She extended a hand to me. I gave her the padded envelope that Art Drinkard had brought. As Micki took out the flat silvery portable DVD player, Arnie said: "I *once again* lodge my most *urgent objections* to Counsel's fishing expedition—and her irrelevant, argumentative, immaterial assertions—and—"

"Ted," Spikes said from his spot by the wall in a weary, cutting tone, "would you *please* just shut up."

I did not see Arnie's reaction because Micki, DVD player in hand, had bent to me. "How do you turn this thing on?" she whispered.

I opened the lid, mashed the ON button. The little screen lit up. Micki put the player on the table and gave it a push. It glided down and stopped not far from Joy and Arnie. He and his flunkies clustered close, staring at the screen. Joy looked too, with an odd half-smile that mystifies me to this day. Micki said, "The footage you're viewing was shot from the parking lot cameras scanning the receiving dock on the east side of the plant. You see the date stamps. The first segment is from February 25 . . . Right about now you're seeing a segment from March 10, again early in

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the morning . . . And now what you're viewing is the same entrance door just after four A.M. on the morning of March 22."

Joy abruptly slid her chair back and rose. "You know what, we're done here."

"Who, madam," inquired Micki, "would be the person the tape shows entering the plant on the morning of your ex-husband's death? Is that you, by chance?"

Joy pushed by Arnie, who was staring dumbstruck at her. "You're on your own," she hissed at him. "I can't help you with this anymore."

"Please, Ms. Monrho!" Micki said. "Don't go. We'd like to hear your answers."

As Joy swept past the law firm flunkies, she looked at us, face a mask of blind sulfuric rage, and spewed a short and specific instruction as to what we could do. Pushing past Spikes, she plunged through the big double doors. Everyone else, including Arnie, who was, for once, speechless, sat frozen, staring. Never one to freeze, I got to my feet and went out into the carpeted hallway. I could have given chase and apprehended her with a full body slam. But there was no need. As Joy Monrho marched up the paneled hallway toward the skylighted foyer, two men in business suits rose from chairs. Between them was a uniformed officer. Joy did not hesitate, just headed toward the elevators. The detectives stepped toward her. "Joy Monrho?"

"Three months," I said.

Micki, who had been lost in thought, stirred. "What?"

"Three months it took," I told her, "after J. J. married Faith, for Joy to fully realize that he was not coming back to her."

"Yes," Faith said.

"All those other separations, he'd always come back. But not this time."

"And she just lost it," Micki said.

"The ultimate scorned woman."

We sat in one of the small Coyne Cose interview rooms. The Melvindale detectives had questioned us, then asked that we sit tight. I needed a smoke; I needed to be on my feet; I needed out of here. Micki sat to my right, Faith to my left. The widow in white was anything but elated. She seemed in fact more numb than ever. She now had to get her mind around a new and much uglier reality. And J. J. was still dead.

"Thing is," Micki said, "Joy'd gotten away with it. It was so obviously an industrial accident, the police had never investigated. But

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she still needed to strike at you," she said to Faith. "And when she heard about our lawsuit, she saw her chance."

"And overreached," I added.

"So cruel," Faith said softly.

We sat in silence for a bit. Then Micki touched my arm. "You did good, Ben. Putting it all together."

"Thanks, coach."

"You can be a whirlwind in a thorn tree. But you get the job done."

I suppose. But, as always, I had help. Art Drinkard, Ike Watt, Del Laing. I thought back to Jugg's Astro Lanes and my chat with Del early on. The big, squishy, hapless lug never seemed all that swift to me. But he was living proof that everyone is an expert at something. What Del Laing was expert at was women like Joy Monrho.

"At least," I remarked, "I got through one without being knifed or shot or run off the road or knocking over furniture. That's something."

He was living proof that everyone is an expert at something. What Del Laing was expert at was women like Joy Monrho.

The door opened and Spikes came in. Up close he was, if anything, skinnier, in his black suit with blank pinstriping that mirrored the vertical black spikes of his hair. He looked grim. "The cops said you all can go."

"Thanks, Gerald," Micki said as we stood.

"I just need to get something out," Gerald said, glaring at Micki.

"Okay."

"Why didn't you come to us? Give us a head's up?"

Micki shrugged. "No time."

"That's not true. You had all weekend. You blindsided us. It's unprofessional."

Micki fixed him with a stare. "We wanted Joy on the record, with sworn testimony. To make sure that if she got nailed, she stayed nailed. We couldn't run the risk of tipping our mitt."

"We'd have worked with you. After all, what you did helped our client."

Micki waved a dismissive hand. "You I can deal with, Gerald. But I couldn't count on that idiot you work for not to screw it all up." Gerald did not react. "And besides," Micki added, with a glance at Faith, "after all the grief that woman caused my client, Faith deserved this moment today."

Gerald was nodding but clearly not buying it. "You'd just better

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file a motion to dismiss, Micki, forthwith. After all, your case against Stone Automotive is moot. And if you think we'll agree to even a nuisance payout, you're dreaming." He spun and stalked out.

We trailed him up the hall toward the elevators. "Oh no," I murmured. "Does this mean we don't get paid?"

"Everybody gets paid," Faith said. "I have the insurance."

"But no big payout from Stone," Micki said.

"That's okay," Faith said as we reached the elevators. "What you two got for me is better than any amount of money."

Now I believed her.

Solution to the May "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

A. Response
B. Oatmeal
C. Bemoans
D. Egghead
E. Reserving
F. Thrills
G. Habitat
H. Authority
I. Horseshoes
J. Nefertiti
K. Barometer
L. Overhauls
M. Oxymoron
N. Kowtows
O. Eccentric
P. Dimwitted
Q. Assessor
R. Neufchâtel
S. Dusty
T. Postal
U. Railroad
V. Inch by inch
W. Nightshade
X. Tempers
Y. Encyclical
Z. Difference

QUOTATION

Author—ROBERT HAHN
Work—"BOOKED AND PRINTED"
(Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, December 2005)

"Patricia Cornwell's debut mystery . . . launched a wave of forensic and crime scene . . . stories . . . that has flooded bookshelves . . . Whether the protagonists are medical examiners or . . . pathologists, they bring . . . their science and . . . humanity to bear on the grisly results of crime."

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POLITICS AND POKER

SARAH WEINMAN

The first time I attended Saturday morning services at Beth Jacob, a man was killed during his own wedding.

The second time proved to be less dramatic, but not by much.

"Oh dear God, he's going to give a speech after all," Sam Levin muttered loudly enough for everyone around him to hear.

"You mean he's not supposed to?" I whispered back, leaning forward so Sam could hear me better.

"No, it's now a tradition for the rabbi to say something at bar and bat mitzvahs. The trouble is the speeches they give are so long that people forget who it was they actually came to hear."

Sam had every right to be annoyed. It was his granddaughter being bat mitzvahed, and so it was supposed to be her special day. And she'd given a pretty good speech too. Others would tell me later that Shira's speech was one of the better ones they'd heard out of the mouths of twelve year olds. But because I didn't understand what she was talking about—something about the laws of purity—all this was lost on me.

Not on Sam, though; he'd beamed throughout the speech, proud of his granddaughter's oratory skills in front of the sprawling crowd of four hundred or so. But the smile had become a scowl, and that didn't bode well. When Sam was in a bad mood, it was a good idea to be as far away from him as possible.

Considering I worked for him at Pern's five days a week, that didn't usually happen.

"Is there any way to walk out of here?" I asked, only half kidding.

I got the answer I deserved: a glare.

Sam had insisted I be seated as close to him as possible. Originally, he wanted me to sit next to him, but his children had been adamant that the front row was reserved strictly for immediate family members. Sam and I had grown closer over the years, but I wasn't blood and never would be. So as a consolation, I sat directly behind him.

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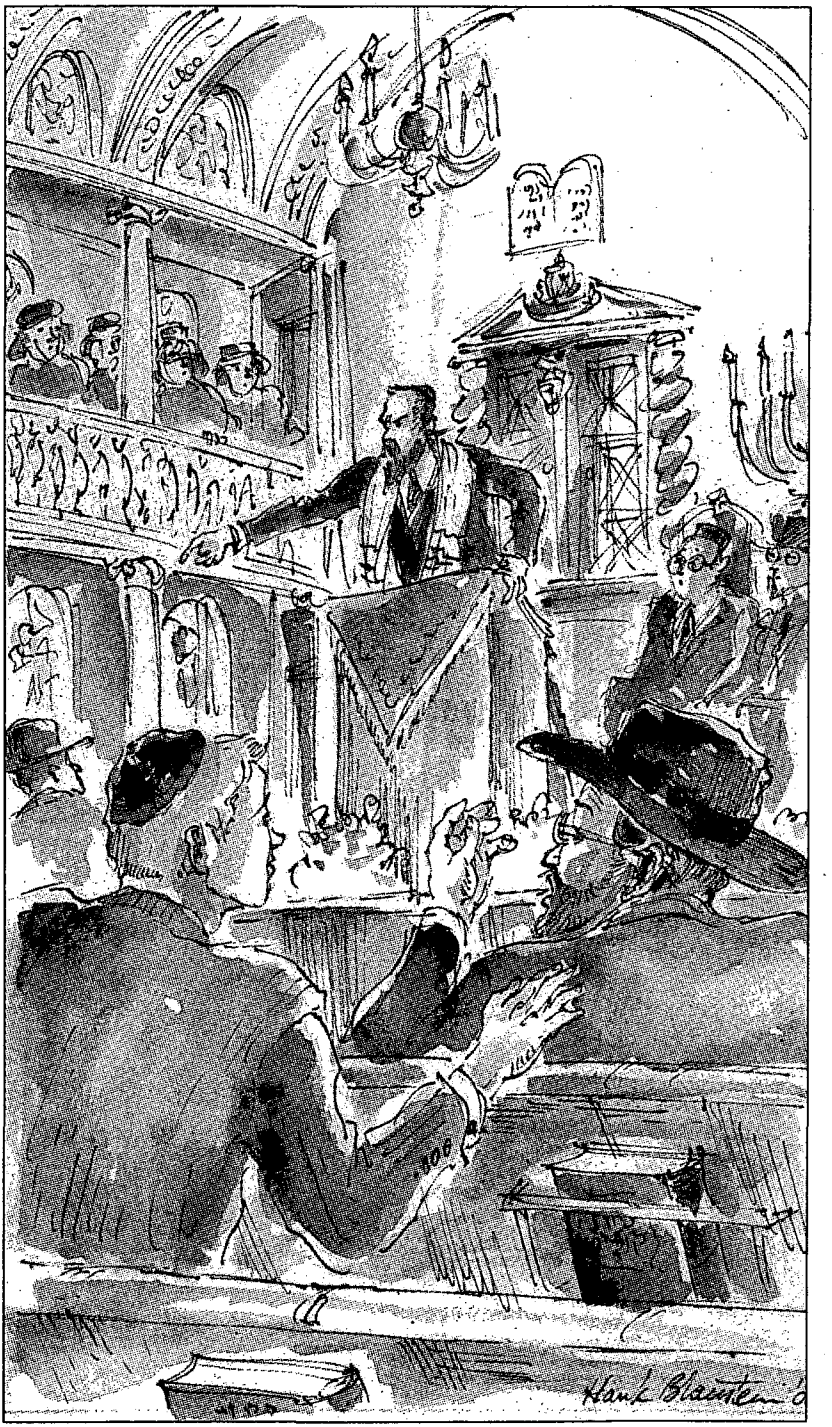

Hank Blaustein

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I'd have been happy to sit anywhere, but I didn't want to disappoint the older man. So I braved his family's curious stares and overly loud whispers as to what I was doing there, and now I had a ringside seat to what looked to be a very good show, if Sam's mutinous expression was anything to judge by.

I leaned back in the uncomfortable seat and waited for the rabbi to begin.

"A fine speech, young lady," he boomed from the pulpit. "But I'd like to take a little time to elaborate on some of the finer points of the *parsha* just to make things a little clearer." The girl smiled up at the rabbi in some approximation of respect, but she looked like she'd rather be somewhere else.

Sam filled me in on the synagogue's newest hire about a week before the bat mitzvah. Rabbi Kranzman was supposed to signal the shul's willingness to update to the twentieth century, hiring someone who was actually under the age of seventy. In fact, Kranzman was all of twenty-nine, fresh out of rabbinical school and full of verve and ideas.

The problem, as Sam explained, was that the rabbi had a tendency to alienate everyone around him. He'd tell the big shots and longtime donors that they really should try to walk to synagogue instead of drive, or criticize the *mechitzah* for being too low, actually allowing the men to see their wives and children across the room. But Kranzman reserved most of his ire for two people in particular: Jack Reichstein, the synagogue's long-standing president, and Meyer Cohen, the cantor. Most people figured the latter feud had to do with money and status, while the former had to do with religious leanings.

Then there was Kranzman's ego, on display every week if you chose to attend Sabbath services. He'd get up and start on the current Torah portion, but by the end, the topic had somehow drifted to the life and times of Menachem Kranzman.

"So why haven't they fired him?" I once asked Sam one afternoon during a lull period at the store.

Sam shrugged. "Nobody can figure it out. How a young man can make so many enemies in such a short period is quite a talent."

I understood that all too well, but when I tried to say this, Sam stopped me. "You're different, Danny. You made a concerted effort to change yourself. Rabbi Kranzman has no intentions whatsoever of damping down his ego."

"Does anyone like him?"

Sam smirked. "Only the eligible women. God help any of them who end up his *rebbetzin*."

Watching him speak, I couldn't see what could possibly attract

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women to this guy. He was tall, a little gaunt, with a pointy black beard and sideburns that went a long way past unruly. And his eyes were a piercing shade of blue—the kind that if I'd encountered them on a remote street corner back in my old life, I'd try to get away from immediately.

Sam elbowed me. "Oh my god! This is even worse than usual!"

I scanned the men's section—jaws were dropped everywhere. What had the rabbi just said? I paid closer attention. "—a worthless community! I can't understand what is afflicting all of you! I try and I try but none of you care to understand the true path of *Hashem*. You're all so caught up with your busy lives and self-absorption that you have lost your way. All I see are *chiluls* everywhere!"

"What's a *chilul*?" I whispered.

"Transgression, abomination, like that," answered Sam.

In this community? What was this rabbi smoking?

But he wasn't finished. Another ten minutes of diatribe passed as he lectured the entire congregation on how unworthy they were, how their stubborn clinging to "outdated methods" like Modern Orthodoxy would be their undoing. And that he wasn't about to stick around to watch them sink into a morass of debauchery and filth.

"Is he saying what I think he's saying?"

Sam's face had turned so red it was veering uncomfortably close to a mixture of flame-colored and deep purple. "He can say whatever he wants but it won't matter—he's ruining my granddaughter's bat mitzvah!"

No kidding. Sam's expression was now dangerously close to outright terror.

"Shouldn't somebody—"

Sam grabbed my shoulder. "Not you, Danny. Let him finish."

No one else said a word, and the rabbi finally finished his tirade uninterrupted, sweat pouring down his forehead. He gave the congregation one last scowl and stormed out of the synagogue.

Sam's granddaughter got up, looking like she was about to cry. She motioned for her parents to join her on the pulpit.

Amazingly, the ceremony continued as if the rabbi's speech had never happened. Shira's parents blessed the girl, then signaled for everyone to go downstairs for the post–bat mitzvah meal. At first, no one quite knew what to say to each other. It was supposed to be a celebration, but the atmosphere felt positively funereal.

Then Sam hushed the crowd.

"Well, you have to admit, that's a hell of a way to resign from a synagogue."

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The crowd laughed nervously, then more genuinely, and things went back to an approximation of normal.

I wondered if I'd ever attend a completely uneventful synagogue service.

A week later I was in the shop waiting for Sam to show up. We were supposed to go over the monthly accounts together, but he was over an hour late. It wasn't like him; normally he beat me to the shop by twenty minutes, and I always made sure to be there a half hour before opening.

I'd just begun to dial his number when someone shrieked behind me.

"Danny! Sam's in terrible trouble!"

It was Sam's daughter Rebecca, the mother of the unfortunate bat mitzvah girl. I'd met her for the first time at the synagogue, and unlike his son Reuben, who clearly couldn't understand why Sam had invited the token goy, Rebecca seemed reasonably civil, if a bit distracted.

I tried to calm her down, but she wouldn't have any of it.

"No, no, there's no way I can possibly be calm, not with my father in jail!"

I couldn't process her words. "Sam? In jail?"

"Oh Danny, it was awful! He's so frail, you know, and when the police came to arrest him—"

"Rebecca, please! Sit down." I rushed from behind the counter and found a nearby chair. I brought it toward the counter and motioned for her to sit.

She sat.

"Now," I said, facing her directly, "Tell me what's going on."

"Rabbi Kranzman was murdered last night. The police think Sam did it."

"Why the hell would they think that?" I blurted out.

"Because of the bat mitzvah," said Rebecca, "and the fact that the rabbi used it as a way to get attention to himself."

"That's a reason for him to kill someone? Seems pretty flimsy."

"The cops, they'll find any reason to arrest someone. And now they've found one for my father." She buried her face in her hands.

"Please, Rebecca, don't cry. I need you to start from the beginning. The rabbi was murdered?"

It took a while, but eventually the story came out. Kranzman's elderly neighbor noticed that the door to his house had been slightly ajar. She'd come in, figuring that there had to be a pretty good reason, but not thinking clearly beyond that. So when Mrs. Gertel found Kranzman lying on the floor, stabbed at least fifteen

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times according to the cops, she ran away screaming and called for help.

The police showed up and started asking questions. Somehow they'd got wind of the whole resignation affair and the utter fury Sam had directed toward the rabbi.

"But didn't they hear about the party?" I asked. "He was in great spirits afterward."

Rebecca sighed. "Oh Danny, you didn't know about their run-in?"

"What run-in?"

"In the men's bathroom. Kranzman had come back because he felt entitled to eat the food as 'an invited guest.' The nerve! But no one could kick him out. Sam tried to and yelled at him so loudly that almost everyone could hear. Where were you?"

I'd left early because I hadn't wanted to keep Sharon waiting. It was our date night and I'd never broken one once since we'd started going out.

But I didn't want to explain that to Rebecca. "I had to leave early."

"And my father didn't tell you what happened?"

"Now that you mention it, he did seem awfully quiet for the past few days."

"Well, he threatened Rabbi Kranzman. Said that if he didn't resign like he'd promised to the public, then he—my father, I mean—would make him pay dearly."

That didn't sound like Sam at all. "Those were his words? 'Pay dearly?' "

"When there were over four hundred witnesses . . ." she trailed off, sounding more helpless than ever.

She tugged at my sleeve. "Danny, you have to get Sam out."

"Well of course," I said. "How much is bail?"

"No, not that! He'll be out by morning. Even though it's a hundred thousand dollars bond."

The cops obviously had much more than they'd told Sam's family, but I didn't say anything. "All right, if not bail, then what?"

She looked at me meaningfully.

I shook my head. "Rebecca, I don't know what Sam told you about me—"

"But you helped Rabbi Brenner out. And Mrs. Sandell—"

"Those were one-offs. I just work in a Judaica bookstore that Sam owns. That's it."

"Danny, we'll pay very well."

She'd said the worst possible thing. I didn't want charity money from the Levins and I said so.

Rebecca seemed genuinely apologetic. "I thought that might

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help, but of course you're right. You've worked with him for so long, he means much more to you than mere money. And truly, Danny, you might even know Sam better than any of us. What would it take for you to help him, to help us?"

I was no private investigator. But somehow, people kept finding me to help them out with little problems. Things like following would-be son-in-laws around Baltimore looking for their dark side. Or spying on community matrons' husbands, looking for some tragic flaw that would enable the women to divorce the louts and collect their due. All ending in ways I never expected, leaving people far worse off than they had been before they'd enlisted me to help.

I'd had my reasons, but I didn't relish doing the same task again. Especially for something far more personal.

But Rebecca was right; Sam did mean a lot to me. And I couldn't let him down.

"Who else do I need to talk to?"

As it happened, not too many others.

Sam was the obvious one, but for some reason, he didn't want me to see him.

I asked Rebecca why.

"He only wants you to talk to him once you've had a chance to meet everyone else."

"But that doesn't make any sense. They weren't arrested for murder."

"No," she said, trying to keep an even keel, "but that doesn't mean they shouldn't be."

I started at the top, so to speak, with the president of the synagogue. I didn't harbor too many hopes he'd tell me anything, but he was surprisingly friendly on the phone.

"Mr. Colangelo! So nice to hear from you. How's the shop doing?"

"Not so good," I admitted, "What with Sam arrested and all."

"A horrible shame. I can't imagine anyone would think he murdered Rabbi Kranzman."

"Neither can I." I wondered how I would ask what I needed to ask. It seemed so strange to blurt out a question like "So, Mr. Reichstein, what were you doing last night while Kranzman was getting killed?"

Luckily, he beat me to it.

"And so you're going around asking everyone else what they were doing when the young man got murdered? Look Danny, it's

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no secret I was no great fan of Kranzman, but murder's not really my thing."

"It's pretty rare for anyone who's ever killed to say it was their 'thing,' Mr. Reichstein."

He laughed. "A fair point. Why don't you meet me tomorrow morning, and I'll tell you what I know."

"Why would you do that?"

He sighed like I'd asked the stupidest question in the world. "Because I'll do everything I can to get Sam cleared."

The next morning, I drove up to his three-story house in Pikesville. It was the kind of house with pink flamingos on the front lawn and three garages for two cars. I couldn't even work up the energy to be envious. It just looked hopelessly garish, and made me miss my Park Heights apartment more.

"Come in," he said after opening the door. The smile on his face looked painted on. For someone who claimed to want to tell me all, he didn't act the part, shuffling nervously from side to side and stumbling when he asked if I wanted something to drink.

"Just coffee," I answered.

He nearly spilled it on me when he came back with two cups. Once he sat down I decided I didn't care anymore, and blurted out the question I'd wanted to ask on the phone.

His eyes widened in shock, real or otherwise. "You have some nerve, Colangelo."

"I doubt I'll be the last to ask the question."

"If you must know, I was out with my wife at a movie."

What did you see?"

"The Da Vinci Code." I didn't say anything, but Reichstein continued anyway, dropping his voice to a whisper. "My wife and I got tickets to see an early release of the movie. She insisted."

He had to be telling the truth; I've never seen a man wince so painfully when talking about a movie before. But it still didn't explain the fidgeting, which was slowly driving me crazy.

"Look, the only reason I'm asking is because of Sam."

"I know. It's just that when I think of Rabbi Kranzman, my blood pressure goes up."

"Why was there so much animosity?"

He settled back in his chair. Reichstein wasn't grossly overweight, but his bulk made his stomach ripple out in waves. It was the strangest thing I'd ever seen, and I momentarily lost concentration as he spoke.

"Everyone thought it had to do with money and that somehow it was my fault he wasn't being paid enough—"

"He wasn't being paid enough?"

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Reichstein shook his head vigorously. "He was being paid ninety grand, if you must know. Not a lot of people do, so don't tell anybody."

Who would I tell? I assumed Sam knew already, and he was the only one I'd share the information with.

Catching the expression on my face, Reichstein grinned. "And that's exactly why I told you. So money, at least salary, wasn't the problem I had."

"So what was?"

"Think of it this way: When you're out with people, at a meal or whatever, there are two topics you're really not supposed to discuss in polite company." He waited, as if I should take my cue.

"Politics and religion," I said.

"Right you are. Money is about politics, at least in a shul setting. Which leaves religion. And that, my friend, is where Kranzman and I didn't see eye to eye."

"You mean he told you how to conduct your life?"

"Oh, he didn't just tell me. He preached. He lectured. He got upset and refused to think that I—representing the viewpoints of the congregation—might have a valid opinion. At first I let it slide, what with him being so young and all."

Menachem Kranzman was the same age as I.

Reichstein barreled on. "But then it became nearly intolerable. One time he had the gall to tell me that he'd spent a Saturday afternoon spying on his neighbors' houses to see if they watched television on Shabbos! I mean, what crackpot does such a thing? I can't say I'm sorry he resigned. I only wish he'd left right away."

"What do you mean?" I straightened in my seat. "He didn't actually quit?"

"Of course not," said Reichstein. "Kranzman may have been a crazed loon, but he'd never break a contract. He had another six months to go and he wasn't about to leave till he was fully paid up."

It didn't make sense. I mulled over Reichstein's words as I drove home and later while I cooked dinner, but I couldn't figure out why Kranzman had made such a public display of disaffection for hundreds of people to see if he hadn't meant it.

"Maybe it was reverse psychology," offered Sharon. She'd been waiting for me when I got home, eager to listen to my bit of news. She didn't know Sam very well yet, but they were a mutual adoration society, and he'd been nearly bereft when she had to back out of attending the bat mitzvah. I half expected Sam to start

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shoving rings in my face at the store, but to his credit—or his caginess—he hadn't done so.

Just thinking of him made me feel worse.

Sharon wrapped her arms around me. "Danny, he'll be all right. Sam's lived through far worse."

"Than a murder charge?"

"You really think it's going to stick? Why would Rebecca have come to you if she really felt her father had committed the crime?"

I turned around. "But I'm just not getting it yet."

"I'll repeat it again: Reverse psychology. Maybe Rabbi Kranzman was trying to make someone in particular believe that he was going to leave. Someone who didn't know the particulars of the contract."

Sharon worked in public relations, but her dad was one of the top contract lawyers in the city. And I don't need to be reminded how lucky I was to have her in my life.

"But wouldn't it be common knowledge amongst the synagogue's elite?"

She stepped back, looked over her shoulder and cried out suddenly. "Oh no, it's overcooking." Stepping towards the stove, she turned down the burner until the pot stopped smoking so strongly.

Afterward, she said, "It might, but if the cantor and the rabbi had no love lost between each other, do you really think they shared information so easily?"

I looked at my watch. "I wonder if I can still catch him."

She moved forward and took my arm. "Hold on. I don't know about you, but I'm starving. And it's still early. Call the cantor after dinner, and then you can track him down."

Sharon: sensible as ever. I didn't know for sure if I loved her, but it sure looked that way.

Three hours later, I found Cantor Cohen in the middle of a poker game. He was not happy to see me.

"And why should I interrupt this game to talk to you?"

There were two other men, both scowling at me in such a way that I should be scared. I wanted to laugh; I'd spent far too much time around crackheads to be scared of some upper middle-class types—especially those who had their poker night in the synagogue's basement.

"You don't have to interrupt," I said. "I could wait till you've finished this hand, and then we can talk."

"Better idea," said the cantor. "Our regular fourth man dropped

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out at the last minute. And I might like you better if you play a few rounds."

You mean you might like me if I lose some money and let you win, I thought. Which, to be honest, was a strong possibility. I never won very much at poker.

But I accepted. Luckily, they weren't playing Texas Hold 'Em, but the more traditional game. Maybe they hadn't caught on to the fact that no one played with full closed hands anymore, thanks to the books and TV shows that flooded the airwaves. So the first hand, I won. Then the next one. But when the overall mood shifted from collegial to surly, I folded on round three, even though it looked like I was well on my way to a straight flush.

Cohen won, and he seemed thrilled to collect the mounting spoils. "I knew fortune would swing my way!" he cried.

The other two guys probably begged to differ, because after round four, they each claimed they had to be elsewhere and took off.

Cohen seemed confused by their behavior.

"Why did they have to leave so fast?"

I shrugged. "Guess it wasn't their night to win."

"I suppose you're right. So what can I do for you? Am I a suspect?"

What was with these guys asking straight out if I thought they killed Kranzman? I felt like my skills needed sharpening, like I wasn't subtle enough.

Inexplicably, Cohen laughed. "Forget it. I have a bit of a problem, as you might have noticed."

"Which is?"

"I'm too blunt for my own good. But Jack warned me you'd be coming—"

"He did?" Shit. Then I remembered something Sam said months ago. That there could never be secrets within a Jewish community, let alone a synagogue. Everyone knew everyone else's business.

"Of course. I admire Jack greatly, and vice versa. We're in constant communication."

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on the table. "So does that mean you think the same things about people?"

"Not necessarily," Cohen shot back. "But when it comes to Rabbi Kranzman, the answer is yes."

"And does that constant communication extend to contract negotiations?"

I could see the wheels turning behind Cantor Cohen's eyes as he considered the question.

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"There are some things that aren't anyone's business," he said evasively.

"Come on, you're saying you didn't know how much Kranzman was making?"

"Of course I did. Seventy-five thousand dollars a year; I was making five thousand more than he was."

So much for constant communication.

"That's not what Jack Reichstein told me the other day."

The wheels turned some more. I could tell that Cohen didn't know how to react. Call the president a liar, and it reflected badly on him. Accept it as truth, and he would have been played. And if he knew all along, it gave him enough motive to kill.

Cohen chose not to say anything at first.

"So you found out about the salary difference. And then you found out Kranzman wasn't actually quitting—"

"You think *that* was a surprise to me? I knew that all along."

"Kranzman told you?"

Cohen got up without warning. He went to the back of the room, and when he returned he held a piece of paper.

"This," he said, thrusting it at me, "is a note Rabbi Kranzman sent me the night before he was murdered."

I took it and began reading. I tried not to give away the shock I felt, but Cohen noticed.

"Exactly," he said, crestfallen. "Kranzman couldn't have quit the shul because he had no reason to do so."

"Not when you were paying him five thousand a month to keep things quiet," I added. "But how's this supposed to prove that you weren't involved in his death?"

"I'm as culpable as every other person he sent such notes to."

Now *this* was interesting. "So he was blackmailing several people?"

"Oh yes," said Cohen. "Rabbi Kranzman had a knack of finding things out. And then using them to further his standing."

"But I don't get it. People loathed him. And he resigned in person. Why would he do that?"

"Because he wanted certain people to believe he'd be crazy enough to do it. He couldn't fool me. Find the person he did fool, and that will be your suspect."

The next week was one of the worst I'd experienced in a long time. Sam was out on bail—on the aforementioned bond of a hundred thousand dollars—but he still refused to talk to me. I would call the house several times a day and he'd never answer. It was

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the strangest thing: Here I was trying to find any way possible to clear him of the charges, and he wouldn't tell me anything at all.

There were aspects of Sam's personality I'd never understood before, chalking it up to past remembrances and old wounds. But this hurt. We'd grown even closer in the months since my mother had died, and I viewed Sam as far more than just my boss and mentor. It was in no small part due to him that I could leave my old life behind and embrace the one I'd started anew.

Sharon tried to cheer me up, but I couldn't shake the grumpy mood.

"He's hiding something," I said.

"You're probably right," she agreed, "but how are you going to get it out of him?"

"I wish I knew. Sam—well, you've met him, you know what he's like."

"A stubborn old bastard who likes to meddle but keep himself out of it to some degree," Sharon said.

"Exactly. So what do I do?"

Sharon laughed. "You keep asking me that. Am I really supposed to know all the answers?"

I smoothed out a stray hair that had fallen in front of her eyes. "Except maybe how you ended up with me . . ."

With Sam staying silent, Rebecca remained our go-between, insisting on hearing any updates I had when she walked back into the store the following Monday morning. I hadn't expected her to show up so early, but it made things a lot easier.

"Blackmail?" she said, after I'd told her what Cantor Cohen had said. "Are you serious?"

"Well, it's pretty logical if you think about it. Kranzman, from all accounts, liked to know everything about everyone and judge them accordingly. So why wouldn't he get the idea to use all that information to further himself?"

The strangest expression crossed Rebecca's face, almost like a shadow. "Did you talk to any other people he supposedly blackmailed?"

"Cohen said there were five others. It didn't take long for me to find them, though none were willing to say much to me."

"Why not?" The shadow was gone.

"Embarrassment, I think. Nobody wants to admit they were paying off a rabbi with several thousand bucks a month to keep his trap shut."

"But shouldn't you have pried more details out of them?" she cried. "They could know something important!"

I sighed. "Not when each and every one of them had a verified

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alibi." This had disappointed me too; I'd managed to check the list out by claiming I worked on behalf of the defense team, and information was easy to come by after that.

"Oh," Rebecca said in a small voice.

"But there is one thing that seems to come up again and again."

Rebecca's head jerked up. "What?"

"That Kranzman's resignation was a bluff."

Rebecca looked incredulous. "It took him all of twenty minutes to ruin my daughter's bat mitzvah, and you're saying he was faking it?"

"Jack Reichstein has good reason to believe it. So does Cantor Cohen."

The blood drained out of her face. It was one thing to accept that Kranzman wanted to shock, but quite another to believe that he'd used a joyous affair simply as a means to grandstand.

"I can't believe he'd sink so low," she said after a long while.

"Look," I said, wanting to change the subject slightly, "when is Sam's arraignment?"

"Tomorrow morning."

I felt like I'd been sucker punched. "I'll be there."

"Please, Danny. Sam wants you in the store."

"I'll get someone else," I said, not bothering to keep the frustration out of my voice. "It's the least I can do."

Rebecca left soon after. I had no doubt now that her father wasn't the only Levin hiding something. And with Sam not talking to me, there was only one person left to speak to.

Business was slow, and after six hours of doing virtually nothing, I finally called Rebecca's house. I knew she wouldn't be home because she'd gone straight to work after her strange visit. But her daughter Shira would be home.

She picked up on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Shira, my name is Danny Colangelo—"

"I know you! You work with *zayda* at the store."

"That's right. Listen, I don't want to bother you for too long, but did your mother have some words with the rabbi?"

Something changed in Shira's voice. She almost sounded excited. "How did you know? She came home after . . . everything and she was even more upset than usual."

"Why?"

"Because the rabbi had said something to her in the bathroom."

"He followed her into the bathroom?"

"Yeah, it was weird. I was already in there, and I was just about to leave when I heard his voice and my mom's. Then I couldn't leave so I stayed and listened. They kept their voices down, but he

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sounded like someone in one of those old movies, threatening the heroine or something."

I was about to ask something else but Shira interrupted me. "Damn, my mom's home. I better go. Bye!"

I cradled the phone. There was my answer.

I buzzed the door of Sam's apartment, wondering if he'd actually let me in. To my surprise, he buzzed me in, and I walked up the five flights of stairs hoping he wouldn't shut me out.

Sam's eyes brightened at first when he opened the door, then narrowed into slits.

"Danny, what the hell took you so long?"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "What do you mean?"

"Rebecca said that you were too busy asking everyone else what they were doing when the rabbi got himself killed to come and see me."

"Sam," I said, adjusting to the rickety chair opposite Sam's rocking chair, "your daughter's been playing each of us off the other. She said you didn't want me to come see you."

"And you listened to her?"

"Why wouldn't I? She's your daughter."

He shook his head sadly. "Yes. She is. But she got herself way in over her head."

I didn't know what to do: shake him or hug him. "And that's why you allowed yourself to be arrested?"

"I knew the truth would come out," he explained. "And even if it didn't, I've survived far worse."

"But this is your life they're messing with, Sam! You'd just give up everything?"

For so long he'd looked a little frailer than he ought to. Now, somehow, he looked strong, even vigorous.

"I'm an old man, Danny. I've lived more years than I have left, and I've been fortunate that most of those years turned out to be very good. I saw my children grow up, give birth to their children, and now the youngest has had her celebration. And what my daughter did, she had her reasons."

"Reasons that don't include stabbing a rabbi in the chest twelve times."

Sam recoiled. "I didn't know that."

"Nobody told you?"

The vigor disappeared, and he looked like a tired old man once again. "All I know is that Kranzman died quickly."

Neither of us spoke for a bit. My mind went round in circles: Sam was prepared to go to jail for his daughter, which would

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deprive him of his family for the rest of his days. But if he was free, Rebecca's punishment would tear apart both older and younger generations.

I looked at him, searching for a solution. Somehow, it had become my decision to make. I knew all too well what awaited either of them in prison. I'd survived, but I couldn't be certain that either of them would.

Finally, I looked Sam in the eye. "I'll find a way," I said.

"You always do, Danny. Even when you think you can't."

It was my cue to leave, but then the door opened.

"Daddy, are you going to be all right for tomorrow—"

Rebecca stopped when she saw me.

"Hello, Rebecca."

She looked at her father, then back at me, her mouth open as if she would say something. When she did, it sounded like she hadn't spoken for weeks.

"You know."

"I didn't tell him!" Sam said.

"Of course not," Rebecca snapped. "I didn't misdirect things enough. I tried, sneaking that note into the cantor's place—"

"You put it there?" I said. "But your name was on the list!"

"Not originally."

She went into the kitchen to get a drink. It struck me as ironic, that someone who'd stabbed a man twelve times for reasons I'd yet to figure out could calmly walk into the kitchen like that.

"I don't get it," I said, when Rebecca returned. "Why would you do this to your father?"

"I wasn't going to do anything! There's so little to hold him that Sam's lawyer is confident the charges will be dropped in the morning. The police don't have anything."

"They have you, Rebecca."

She spat at me. "What the hell do you know? You're just a druggie ex-con who got the job out of pity. You think you're good enough? You think you can waltz into my father's life and be like the son he never had, when he already had children? And grandchildren?"

I watched Sam, his face turning to utter horror at his daughter's words.

Rebecca rushed toward him, falling to her knees, sobbing. "But Daddy! I loved him, I loved him so much, and he ruined everything! He was going to leave, and that he humiliated Shira, hurt me like that—"

Finally, he spoke.

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"I expected better of you," he said, the voice of a man whose spirit had finally broken.

The shop stayed shut for several weeks after Rebecca turned herself in. I visited Sam as much as I could, and he tried to be his usual joking self, but we both knew it was futile. The only times he brightened up were when I brought Sharon around. One time he whispered, "Don't let her go, Danny. She's the best thing that ever happened to you."

I looked at her, the lustrous brown hair that always seemed moments from escaping from its ponytail, the eyes so bright and alive.

"You think so?" I whispered back.

"Absolutely."

I knew better than to ignore his advice. But on the way home, I told Sharon I needed to make one last stop.

"Where to?" she asked, bewildered in the change of plans.

"There's a poker game I need to sit in on."

"Promise you won't stay late?"

"That's the easiest promise I can make."

She swung the car over to the synagogue's entrance. I kissed her quickly before heading downstairs to the game. Jack Reichstein, Cantor Cohen, and the *gabbai*, whose name I didn't remember, were deep into a competitive round. A pile of chips was stacked in front of Cohen, who seemed to relish his good fortune.

Everyone turned when I shut the door behind me.

"Looking for a fourth?" I said.

Reichstein grinned. "For you? Anything."

In this case, politics wasn't more predictable because any thought of stacking the deck was shot at every turn. And I wanted something predictable.

I sat in and let everyone else win.

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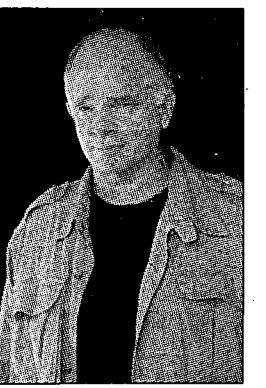
REEL CRIME

STEVE HOCKENSMITH

Gerald Petievich knows the Secret Service's biggest secret—and he's willing to spill the beans. Prepare yourself. It's a whopper. "There are no secrets in the Secret Service," Petievich says. "It's not a clandestine organization."

Alright, so the "secret" is pretty anti-climactic. But just because the agency doesn't live up to its name doesn't mean a writer won't find plenty of juicy material in its case files.

Just ask Petievich. As a Secret Service agent for fifteen years, he worked plenty of juicy cases himself. And as a novelist, he's spent the last two and a half decades turning those experiences into hard-edged mystery/thrillers—the latest of which, *The Sentinel*, hit cineplex screens in April thanks to a big-budget adaptation.



Gerald Petievich

The film stars Michael Douglas as Pete Garrison, a Secret Service agent who's not just a bodyguard to the First Lady (Kim Basinger). He's also her lover. Things get (more) complicated when Garrison finds himself targeted by a mysterious blackmailer. As if that weren't bad enough, Garrison's ambitious protégé (Kiefer Sutherland) considers him the number one suspect when a fellow agent is murdered. Disgraced, Garrison fights to clear his name—and uncovers a plot against the President in the process.

"The idea came to me during the Clinton administration," says Petievich (who left the Secret Service in 1985 to write full time). "I thought to myself, 'You can't really write about [the Monica Lewinsky scandal] because it's so bizarre.' But it got me wondering what the First Lady's reaction would be to finding out her husband's a philanderer. The novel grew out of that."

It also grew out of Petievich's experiences as a special agent, of course. During his years with the Secret Service, he heard plenty of rumors about dalliances between bodyguards and

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their high-profile "protectees." And he himself served on security details for Ronald Reagan, Henry Kissinger, Moshe Dayan, and other famous leaders.

But despite the glamour of such assignments (and the edgy suspense of *The Sentinel*), Petievich says safeguarding the high and mighty is actually mighty darned *boring*.

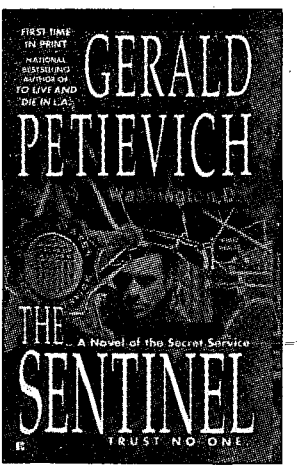
"I avoided it as much as I could," he says. "Protective work is the same thing a security guard does. You go on duty at midnight and you stand in a hallway until eight A.M. That's your job. Virtually nothing ever happens."

Rather than spending his days standing in hallways or jogging alongside limos, Petievich wrangled assignments related to the Secret Service's other main mission: catching counterfeiters.

"When you're out in the field working undercover and serving search warrants and arresting people, that's an interesting, exciting business," Petievich says.

Hollywood apparently agrees: Two of Petievich's previous books have been turned into films, both of them focusing on Secret Service agents on the trail of flamboyant counterfeiters. One—1993's *Boiling Point*, based on the novel *Money Men*—is largely forgotten (even Petievich describes it as "talky" and "boring"). The second is a cult classic: *To Live and Die in L.A.*

Petievich worked closely with director William Friedkin on the noir-ish 1985 film, and the two ended up sharing a screenwriting credit. But it was hardly a collaboration of equals. At the time, Friedkin was a showbiz heavy hitter thanks to smashes like *The French Connection* and *The Exorcist*. So if, on a whim, he made a decision that in hindsight seems questionable—sprinkling snippets of pretentious performance art throughout the film, let's say, or hiring then-hot synth-popsters Wang Chung to write the music—there was little Petievich could do about it.



"The only problem I have with the movie would be the extraneous things that were put in, which nobody could figure out. But that's just what some directors do," Petievich sighs. "It's a narcissistic thing. They just want to touch it."

Despite some lingering disappointment with Friedkin's choices on *To Live and Die in L.A.*, Petievich collaborated with the director again on the 1986 pilot *C.A.T. Squad*, which was supposed to

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kick off a series of TV movies about an elite anti-terrorist team. But the friction with Friedkin heated up, and Petievich walked away before the second (and, as it turned out, final) *C.A.T.* telefilm was completed.

The Sentinal © *20th Century Fox and Regency Enterprises*

In the years that followed, Petievich occasionally took on other Hollywood assignments. But as is so typical for Tinseltown, none of the projects made it to the screen, and eventually Petievich tired of the endless meetings and "script notes" (i.e., random suggestions from clueless suits) that always seemed to lead nowhere.

–"People in the movie business don't actually know anything about movies," he says. "They're in it because there's so much money in it. Very few people have more than one or two successes. A producer or director or actor will have one hit, and then they'll hang around for the next ten years [making flops]."

The same can't be said of Petievich: He's done hanging around Hollywood, at least as a screenwriter. Though he'll happily cash a check for an option on one of his books, that's as involved as he's willing to become with any film project.

"It's a collaborative medium, and the people you're collaborating with are telling you what to do," he says. "And in this day and age, it's going to be someone who's not only never written anything, they've never *read* anything. They're usually about twenty-two years old and they'll tell you to change your story, and after you spend five months doing it, they'll tell you they liked it the way it was before. I'm not interested in putting up with that anymore."

So he doesn't. What Petievich does instead is work on novels—one at a time, never under a multibook contract. Burned by the bureaucratic infighting he encountered in the Secret Service and the inflated egos so common in the entertainment industry, he doesn't want anyone looking over his shoulder or telling him what to do.

"For all the stress that there is as a writer, you're your own boss," says Petievich, who's currently working on a new political thriller. "If you're a novelist, you don't have to answer to anyone. So that's what I choose to do."

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DIDN'T DO NOTHING

STEVE HOCKENSMITH

Every day, Scottie Crocker walked past Jayzee's corner on his way to the store for a Coke. And every day, one of Jayzee's guys would waddle after him, imitating him, babbling, maybe even drooling. Scottie had learned to ignore them.

But then one day, Jayzee himself actually spoke to Scottie, and Jayzee you couldn't ignore.

"Hey, Crackhead!" Jayzee said. "Come here!"

All the young people in the neighborhood called Scottie "Crackhead." Some of the older people too. When it first started, Scottie tried to argue.

"I ain't no crackhead!"

He always got the same answer.

"No, you just act like one!" And laughter.

So Scottie stopped fighting it, and when Jayzee said, "Hey, Crackhead! Come here!" Scottie walked over and said, "What?"

"You know Goldfinger, right?"

"You . . . you mean Michael Gra . . . Graham? D-down on Eighty-first St . . . Street?"

It was hard for Scottie to get words out when he was nervous—and Jayzee made him nervous. Jayzee was a few years younger than Scottie, probably no older than eighteen or nineteen, but he had a confidence, a fierce fearlessness, that Scottie knew he'd never have no matter how long he lived.

"Yeah, yeah, *him*," Jayzee said.

"I . . . I know him. I went to school wi-wi . . . with his sister."

Jayzee's guys snickered.

"Didn't know you ever went to school, Crackhead," one of them said.

"Sure he did," another cackled. "Crackhead went to retard school."

"Oh, yeah," the first one said. "Used to see him ridin' the short bus."

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"I ain't no retard!"

Scottie knew immediately that he'd made a mistake. That was his problem. People would lay traps for him, the same traps over and over, but he never recognized them until it was too late.

The guys' eyes lit up, and it was just a matter of who would say it first.

No, you just act like one.

Jayzee spoke first. But he *didn't* say it.

"Hey, hey, ease off," he told his guys. He snaked an arm around Scottie's neck. "Crackhead's my man—ain't you, Crackhead?"

"Sure," Scottie said, because his mistake had reminded him to be cautious.

"Good. Cuz I need you to do somethin' for me. And if you do it right, I'll give you twenty dollars."

The guys whistled and whooped.

"Twenty dollars, Crackhead!" one of them said, punching Scottie's arm. "That's a lot of money!"

"Wh-what I gotta do?"

Jayzee smiled. "Nothin'. Just go over to Goldfinger's corner—Eighty-first and Langley—and take a walk around." He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a cell phone. "Then push this button—this one right here. See it? REDIAL? Can you read that?"

"Sure."

"What I tell you?" Jayzee said to his guys. "My man here ain't no retard." When he turned back to Scottie, his smile had grown even bigger. "When you push that button, the phone'll call me. And when I pick up, you just tell me who's over there with Goldfinger and what they doin' and what side of the street they on. But don't let Goldfinger see you, understand?"

"Sure."

"Good. That's it. That's all you gotta do. Can you do it?"

"Yeah, I . . . I guess."

"All right! That's my man!" Jayzee slapped Scottie on the back. "I give you the money when you get back."

"Okay."

"All right, then."

Scottie stood there a moment, confused by this break in his daily routine of watching TV and going to the store for Cokes and heading home for more TV.

"Well, *go*, Crackhead," Jayzee said, still smiling.

"Ri . . . right now?"

"Yeah, right now. Go on."

Jayzee's guys laughed as Scottie walked away. Certain people

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were always laughing when Scottie was around. He didn't know why. He didn't think he was funny.

It took Scottie fifteen minutes to walk to Eighty-first Street. In that time, he left his neighborhood and entered another. There were no border checkpoints, no men in uniform asking for passports, but most men Scottie's age would have been unwelcome foreigners there. They would have seen the warnings—graffiti, glares, posture, gestures—and they would have left. Quickly.

But Scottie was different. He didn't see the danger signs, and because he didn't see them, they had no power. And because they had no power, they had no reason for being. The slouch of his shoulders, the perpetual bend in his knees, the trudging rhythm of his gait, his breathy mumbling and unfocused eyes—it charged him like a magnet. He didn't attract attention here. He repelled it. He wasn't a threat, so he could be ignored.

Michael Graham—"Goldfinger"—ignored him too.

"I saw Mi-Michael with his little br . . . brother Ronnie and another guy," Scottie told Jayzee over the phone. He was in an alley a half block from Goldfinger's corner. "A man pulled up in a car and th-they talked and then he drove a . . . away."

"Which side of the street they on?"

Scottie thought hard. "The closer side."

"Closer to our neighborhood? You mean the north side?"

"Yeah. I guess."

"And it was just the three of 'em?"

"Yeah."

"Who went up to talk to the guy in the car?"

"Michael."

"You sure about that? *Goldfinger* walked up to the car?"

"Yeah. I'm sh . . . sure."

"By himself?"

"Yeah."

"Damn," Jayzee said. He didn't sound angry, though. He sounded surprised and pleased. He even laughed. "You my man, Crackhead. I see you later."

Scottie stuffed the phone into his pocket and headed home. When he got back to his own street, Jayzee was still on his corner. But only one of his guys was with him—a skinny kid called "Freak." Jayzee's other guys were gone.

Jayzee held out his hand.

"Phone," he said.

Scottie dug the cell phone out and handed it over.

Jayzee didn't look at the phone as it slid into his palm. His eyes stayed locked on Scottie, piercing him, pinning him in place.

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Scottie couldn't hold the gaze. He looked down at his shoes.

When he looked back up, Jayzee was smiling.

"You did good, Crackhead," Jayzee said. He turned to Freak. "Give the man his money."

Freak guffawed.

"What are you laughin' at?" Jayzee snapped. "I said give my man Crackhead twenty dollars."

The laughter choked to a stop, and Freak slowly pulled a wad of money from his jacket and counted out twenty ones and gave them to Scottie.

Scottie couldn't believe how light and small and dry the bills were. He didn't expect twenty dollars to feel that way. He thought it would be heavier.

"You did good," Jayzee said again. "Maybe I'll need you to take another walk for me sometime."

"Okay," Scottie said.

"Hey, Crackhead," Freak said, as Scottie turned to go. "Gimme that money back and I'll give you somethin' good."

Scottie kept walking. He already knew what he wanted. He had to take the bus and walk six blocks and then take the bus again, and by the time he got back, he only had a few pennies and dimes left, but it was worth it.

When Scottie's aunt Nichelle came home from her night job, she found him in front of the TV with his ten-year-old cousin Keesha. They were playing Super Mario Bros. 3 on the battered old Nintendo Scottie had purchased that afternoon at a Funcoland on Cicero.

"Where'd you get that?" Nichelle asked. There wasn't much snap in her words. She worked three jobs to support herself and Keesha and Scottie. She didn't have the energy for snap.

It took Scottie a few seconds to answer. Mario was jumping, grabbing magic coins out of the air. "I bought it."

"Where'd you get the money?"

"Jayzee Clements gave it to me."

"Jayzee Clements? Why would he give anything to you?"

"I did somethin' for him."

A giant plant snapped at Mario, almost swallowing him, and Scottie grunted and cursed. Keesha giggled and said, "Hey!"

"What'd you do for Jayzee?"

Scottie shrugged without turning to look at his aunt. "Nothin'."

"Make up your mind, Scottie. Did you do *somethin'* or did you do *nothin'*?"

Scottie began to breathe hard, almost panting. It was the sound

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he made when he couldn't make words, when the circuit between his brain and his mouth overloaded, shorted out.

On the screen, Mario hopped and ran and hopped and ran until he ran when he should have hopped. He plummeted off a cloud, disappearing from the screen, and Keesha shouted, "My turn! My turn!"

Scottie handed her the controller and finally looked around at Nichelle.

"I bought McDonald's too," he said. "We saved you some fries." He wasn't panting anymore. He was smiling.

Nichelle didn't return his smile. Instead, she took in a deep breath and held it for a moment, as if unsure what to do with the air in her lungs—talk, yell, scream, sigh.

In the end, she did none of these things. She simply turned and walked into the kitchen. It was almost ten o'clock, and she hadn't had dinner.

Scottie found out Goldfinger was dead nearly a week later. Scottie was in church with Nichelle and Keesha, and some of the ladies were shaking their heads about that poor Michael Graham, who had so much promise once. Scottie thought it was sad too.

A few days after that, Jayzee stopped him on the street again.

"Hey, Crocker!" Jayzee called out.

Not "Crackhead." *Crocker*.

"I got another secret mission for ya', C," Jayzee said when Scottie got close. "You know Marcus Dillard?"

He did. Scottie spent the next day following him, just as Jayzee asked. It was like a game, watching Marcus, trying not to be seen, and Scottie enjoyed it. He found himself moving more quickly, and *thinking* more quickly than he had in years.

He reported back to Jayzee the next morning. He stammered at first, fighting with the words. But for once Scottie won that fight, and the words started to come quickly and obey him.

". . . and then he went to the building where Ricky Thompson lives and he talked to Ricky outside and Ricky gave him somethin' in a brown bag and they looked at me so I went around the corner. And when I came back Marcus was gone so I looked for him and I found him walkin' up Calumet and he stopped and got a burrito and then he started walkin' again. And Dion Baker was drivin' by in a car and he got out and Marcus gave him the thing he'd been carryin' and . . ."

By the time Scottie was finished, Jayzee and his guys were laughing. But Scottie could tell it was a different kind of laughter this time, a kind he rarely heard. He didn't understand it until

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Jayzee, shaking his head, said, "Damn, C. You really got you some eyes, don't you?"

It was good. Scottie had done *good.*

Jayzee gave him another twenty dollars, and Scottie bought more old games for his Nintendo and a frozen pizza and a birthday present for Keesha—a pink Dora the Explorer backpack he found at Goodwill—even though her birthday had come and gone two months before. Scottie hadn't worked in years, not since he'd lost his job sweeping up at McDonald's because he forgot to show up sometimes, and he yelled at the customers when they called him "retard" and "Crackhead." So for once, Scottie had his own money to buy Keesha a gift, and it didn't matter to him if it was her birthday or not. Aunt Nichelle didn't ask any questions this time, and Scottie felt something he hadn't felt in so long he'd forgotten he could feel it: pride.

A few days later, Marcus Dillard and Ricky Thompson were dead.

They were found together in a dumpster, both of them shot in the chest. Scottie's pride turned sour, bubbling in his stomach as if he'd swallowed something rancid. He wasn't sure why he felt that way. No one knew who'd killed Marcus and Ricky, and *Scottie* certainly hadn't hurt anybody. But the pain in his gut wouldn't go away.

There was a memorial service for Marcus at Scottie's church, and Scottie and Nichelle and Keesha went. The body was there, in an open casket, and Scottie almost expected Marcus to sit up and say something to him, say something *about* him.

But just looking at a dead man can't bring him back to life, Scottie told himself. Just like looking at a living man can't kill him.

Scottie avoided Jayzee's corner after that, going blocks out of his way when he went to the store. He avoided certain thoughts in the same way—sidestepping them, not taking the most direct route from point A to point B. He didn't think about why he was staying away from Jayzee. He didn't think about why he'd stopped playing his Nintendo games. He tried not to think about any *whys* at all.

But it wasn't easy to avoid Jayzee—not if *he* wanted to see *you.* One day when Scottie was in the store buying himself a Coke, he turned to find Freak behind him, blocking his way out.

"Hey, Crackhead," Freak said. "Whatcha doin'?"

Scottie shrugged. "N-n- . . . nothin'."

"Good. Then you can come with me."

Freak wrapped a hand around Scottie's arm and pulled him

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toward the door. Even after they were outside, the hand remained, steering Scottie to Jayzee's corner.

Jayzee greeted them with a big smile. "C! Where you been, my man?"

"I . . . I b-been . . . I been around."

"Not where *I* could see you." There was still a smile on Jayzee's face, but Scottie couldn't hear any smile in his voice.

"I . . . I j-just . . . I . . ."

Words abandoned Scottie, and he began to huff out hard puffs of air in their place.

"Hey, C! Don't get like that," Jayzee said, sounding friendly again. He wrapped an arm around Scottie's shoulders, pulling him in tight. "I was just worried somethin' was wrong, that's all."

Scottie's breathing slowed. Jayzee's smiling face was just inches from his own, so close they were inhaling the same air. Scottie tried to smile back.

"N-nothin's wrong," Scottie said, unsure if his words were true or not.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Jayzee's hand squeezed the flesh between Scottie's shoulder and neck. It felt reassuring at first, but the pressure increased, began to pinch, swaying on the line between pleasure and pain.

"You'd tell me, wouldn't you?" Jayzee said. "If somethin' was wrong?"

Scottie nodded. "Y-yeah. Sure."

Jayzee let go of Scottie and took a step back.

"Good. Cuz I need you again."

"N-need . . . me?"

"That's right, C. You know Antoine Miller, right?"

Everyone knew Antoine Miller—knew to stay away, unless they were in the market for something he could provide. He had a corner of his own, guys of his own, just like Jayzee.

Just like Michael Graham.

"Sure," Scottie said.

"Go do your James Bond thing on him. See what he's doin' and how he does it." Jayzee slipped a hand into his jacket pocket and pulled something out. "Then use this."

Scottie looked down.

The cell phone.

Scottie didn't take it.

"I . . . I . . ."

"You *what*?" Jayzee said. He was still holding his hand out to Scottie. The phone hung between them like a bridge.

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"I . . . I wanna know. Wh . . . what's gonna happen?"

Freak and the rest of Jayzee's guys had been snorting, snickering, whispering. But suddenly they were totally silent. Totally still.

Scottie wasn't sure what he expected Jayzee to say until Jayzee didn't say it. Scottie expected a laugh, he realized. He expected "Whatta you mean, C? Nothin's gonna happen."

But what Jayzee said was, "Why you wanna know that?"

The way he said it, it didn't sound mean or angry. It didn't even sound like a question. It sounded like advice.

"Well, what . . . what if—?"

Jayzee cut Scottie off with a sigh. "What am I askin' you to do, C? Look a little. Talk a little. Well, lookin' and talkin' don't hurt nobody, right? Whatever else happens—" Jayzee shrugged. "That ain't you."

Scottie hesitated, thinking it over.

"B-but what if—"

"You afraid somebody might get hurt?" Jayzee snapped. He did sound angry now. He was losing his patience.

Still, Scottie nodded.

"Well, stop worryin' about people you don't even know. You oughta be worried about *Keesha*." Jayzee's gaze flicked over to Freak for a split second. Freak's eyes brightened. "You oughta be worried about your aunt. *They* could get hurt. You hear what I'm sayin', retard?" He pushed the phone into Scottie's belly like a knife. "I ain't gonna explain anymore. You gonna do this thing."

Scottie took the phone.

Jayzee put another grin on his face, and Scottie saw for the first time how stiff and unnatural Jayzee's smile really was, like a plastic mask strapped to his face with a rubber band.

"That's my man," Jayzee said. "Don't worry, C. This is the last time I'll ask you to help me." His eyes connected with Freak's again, flashing some silent message. "The last time. I promise. Now go."

He sent Scottie on his way with a pat on the back. Jayzee's guys joined in as Scottie shuffled away, each of them slapping him between the shoulder blades as they giggled at some private joke.

"Thanks, Crackhead."

"You can do it, Crackhead."

"Yeah, go get 'em, Crackhead."

And the last words, from Freak.

"See ya' later, Crackhead."

It took Scottie ten minutes to walk to Antoine Miller's corner. Houses and apartment buildings and cars and people slid past unseen as he shambled along. He was thinking about what was

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going to happen to Antoine—and anyone standing nearby when it happened. He thought about how he'd never meant to hurt anybody, and how that didn't matter. You could hurt someone by doing practically nothing at all. He thought about the people he would hurt if he did nothing now—Keesha and Aunt Nichelle, maybe even himself. And when he saw Antoine Miller, he knew what he had to do.

"He's on the west side of Eb-Eb . . . Eberhart Avenue," Scottie told Jayzee over the phone. "There's another guy wi-with him who goes up to the cars and talks to the dr-dr . . . drivers. Then he calls Antoine over and Antoine g-g-gives him something in a bag."

"Antoine comes to the car with the stuff?"

"Yeah."

"And it's just him and one other guy there now?"

"Yeah."

A muffled rumble came over the line, the sound of Jayzee putting his hand over the phone and saying something to his guys. Then the rumbling stopped, and Jayzee was back, his voice clear and bright.

"Go home. Right now. Stay there."

"Okay."

"We shouldn't be seen talkin' to each other today. Freak'll give you your money tonight. Meet him in the alley behind your building at midnight."

"Okay."

"Don't tell anybody you're goin' to see him. It's a secret, right? Just between us."

"Okay."

There was a long pause, and just as Scottie began to think Jayzee was gone, Jayzee spoke again.

"Good-bye, C," he said.

"Bye, Jayzee."

Jayzee hung up then, so Scottie turned the phone off and put it back in his pocket.

"S-see?" he said to the burly man who'd been leaning in close, his ear just inches from the phone while Scottie and Jayzee spoke.

"How do I know that was really Jayzee Clements?" Antoine Miller asked. He was glaring at Scottie skeptically, like someone might look at a unicorn or an angel—something too good to be true. It was the same expression he'd been wearing ever since Scottie crossed the street and walked up to him and his guys and said, "I g-got to tell you s-somethin'."

"I d-don't know. It just . . . is," Scottie said with a shrug. "He'll

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send Tommy and . . . B-Boost. They're probably on their way now. Jayzee'll stay on his corner a-a . . . alone with Freak."

"If this is some kinda trick, retard, I swear I'll hunt you down and mess you up," Antoine growled.

"I ain't l-lyin'."

Antoine went on staring at Scottie for a long time, his guys gathered silently around him, waiting for his signal, ready to sneer, laugh, kill.

"Naw," Antoine finally said, "you're too dumb to lie this good, ain't you?"

Then he turned away and started barking out orders.

"T. T., Ray—go get Tonio and have him drive you down to Jayzee's corner. You know what to do—just like we done with Jon-Jon and McNeil. Monk and me'll take care of things here. Monk, when that car pulls up, you go around behind it and . . ."

They were ignoring Scottie, too absorbed in their war plans to waste any more time on the "retard." So he left.

Scottie took his time walking home. He was hoping he'd miss it all—return to find a quiet street, a deserted corner. Whatever he'd brought into his neighborhood, he didn't want to see it.

Not that he should feel guilty. None of it would be his fault. Jayzee said it himself: Lookin' don't hurt nobody. Talkin' don't hurt nobody. Whatever else happens, that ain't you, right? *Right?*

When Scottie got back to his block, he saw the flashing lights of police cars and ambulances. A woman—someone's mom or aunt or sister—was out by Jayzee's corner, screaming. A crowd was gathered around, people pulled from in front of their televisions by the drama outside their doors. Some were trying to comfort the hysterical woman. Most simply stood nearby, watching.

Scottie didn't join them. Instead he went upstairs and switched on the TV and the Nintendo.

He turned the volume up loud.

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

We raced up the stairs. Repeated rings and knocks brought no reply, but listening closely I could disunguish a hollow groan coming from within

—Agatha Christe

From "The Chess Problem" (1927) in The Big Four

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ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

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UNSOLVED

LOGIC PUZZLE BY ROBERT V. KESLING

Four experienced seamen brought, refurbished, and provisioned the old *Polar Cub*, planning to sail her northward to Haines, Alaska, and there join the Klondike gold rush. They included the captain, first mate, navigator, and cook. They took along a "cabin boy" (actually age twenty-seven) to do menial chores, and a dog handler to look after the three dozen huskies aboard, which would be needed to pull their sleds up the treacherous trail to the gold fields.

Each of the six men wore a distinctive outfit, with a shirt—buckskin, corduroy, cambray, denim, flannel, or red wool; pants—brown wool, corduroy, denim, leather, plaid wool, or twill; and footwear—caribou mukluks, moccasins, overshoes, or boots of cowhide, rubber, or sealskin.

When all was in readiness, the captain shouted, "Up anchor!" and the *Polar Cub* left port.

1. Mr. King, the man wearing corduroy pants, and the one in sealskin boots (who doesn't wear the twill pants) include Andy, Bart, and Carl (who isn't the first mate). Carl's shirt isn't corduroy.

2. Dan (who doesn't wear the twill pants), the captain, and the man in the cowhide boots are (in some order) Mr. Gant, Mr. Ingram (who doesn't have the caribou mukluks), and Mr. Lawson (who isn't the cabin boy). None of the three wears the red wool shirt.

3. Bart (who isn't the first mate), the cook (who is neither Frank nor the man in corduroy pants), and the man in plaid wool pants are (in some order) the men wearing overshoes, moccasins, and caribou mukluks. The one wearing moccasins does not have the buckskin shirt. None of the three is the cabin boy or the man in the corduroy shirt.

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4. Frank, the first mate, and the man wearing rubber boots (who isn't Dan) are wearing (in some order) pants of brown wool, denim, and leather. The man with denim pants isn't Mr. Judson.

5. Mr. Hull (who isn't Eddie), the man in brown wool pants, and the one wearing caribou mukluks (who isn't Mr. Lawson) include the cabin boy, dog handler, and navigator (who isn't wearing the denim shirt).

6. Dan, the cabin boy, and the man wearing overshoes have shirts of cambray, denim, and flannel (in some order).

7. Mr. Gant made friends with the dog handler and Eddie (who does not wear the leather pants). One of the three has a denim shirt; none of them has the flannel shirt. Eddie's shirt is not corduroy.

Northerly gales delayed their voyage several days. Then the navigator announced that, barring unforeseen accidents, the *Polar Cub* would reach Haines the following afternoon. Everyone cheered. After a hearty supper in the mess room, the captain broke out the whiskey to celebrate. All imbibed rather freely. Then one by one they staggered off to their bunks. Only two men were left at the still-cluttered table.

The following morning one man lay dead, sprawled on the floor of the mess room, a thick-bladed knife embedded in his chest and blood spattered over his corduroy shirt.

As the others looked on in stunned silence, the captain knelt and examined the body. "Poor devil put up quite a struggle," he declared. "And he has strands of red wool under his fingernails! Those could only have come from the killer's shirt."

The captain stood up and pointed, "Throw that man in irons! We'll turn him over to Haines officials tomorrow."

From their kennels deep in the hold, the huskies started a mournful howling, a dirge for the slain man.

Who killed whom?

The answer will appear in the July/August issue.

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THE MAXNOME RIDDLE

My secretary-receptionist-fiancée Beverly Wayne, leaned entrancingly against the doorjamb between my office and her waiting room, arched her eyebrows, and tossed her red tresses at me. "She is here, Michael, my boy. But before I show Miss Moneybags in, please be reminded that we are firmly engaged and that she is a murder suspect."

"She must be very pretty," I said.

Beverly smiled and raised one hand up to her throat. "Gorgeous she is, upstairs, but from here on down, gangbusters! Watch your step, Dr. Karlins. I shall be lurking just outside this thin door."

Clinical psychologists deserve a little fun, and since most of my clients in my West L.A. practice are about as exciting to observe as a dish of boiled spinach, this one was bound to be interesting, gorgeous or not. I had never had a client worth several millions and suspected of murdering the source of the money.

Rising, I moved the chair by my desk out a bit when Elizabeth Anderson arrived. She was, indeed, a lovely girl, the kind who wins beauty contests. Her face, bearing, and figure would give her a sporting chance at the movies or television after winning the contests, but I'd read that she had taken a different course. After becoming Miss Nevada of 1970, she had become engaged to the young owner of several forests, lumber mills, and paper factories, and had withdrawn abruptly from the Miss America contest. He had rewritten his will to make her his sole heiress, in happy anticipation of a February wedding, but someone shot him in January and the latest tabloid word was that all the money was going to her, provided she did not get convicted of his murder.

She sat in the chair, adjusted her skirt, then gazed directly at me with the loveliest pair of violet-blue eyes that I had ever seen.

"I didn't want to come here, Dr. Karlins," she said with a shy smile.

Originally published in AHMM, *May 1971.* *Copyright © 1971 by H.S.D. Publications, Inc., reprinted by permission of the author.*

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"My friend, Dean Ness, talked me into it. I don't think you can do anything for me, but Dean is very persuasive. He's hard to turn off when he gets an idea into that handsome head of his."

I had talked to Dean the night before. He was a man I'd known at college and met several times a year at parties and S.C. football and basketball games. He'd phoned to ask if I thought I could do anything for the girl. His story was that she was completely broken up about the death of the young millionaire and refused to start living her own life again. When I asked him what his interest in the matter was, he had been blunt.

"I want to marry the girl, damn it. I asked her to marry me before she ever met David Landmaier, and I want to marry her, still. I don't have much chance if she keeps mooning over the jerk's death. I can't compete with a ghost."

I told Ness that I could usually desensitize people to freeway phobias, airplane travel fears, and to cigarette withdrawal pangs, but that desensitization to death was quite another matter. However, I agreed to see the girl out of sheer curiosity more than anything else. I'd been reading about the case in the morning papers for weeks.

"I talked to Dean Ness last night," I said. "He thinks you grieve too much and too long."

She frowned slightly and made a little gesture as if she were waving away a wisp of smoke in front of those incredible eyes. "Dean is confused. He thinks I'm mourning for poor David. What is really bothering me, Doctor, is the prospect of being convicted of David's murder. The police are convinced I had something to do with it. I haven't told Dean about that. I'm ashamed to."

I leaned back in my chair and thought about what I had read of the case. Miss Anderson's story was that she had been playing tennis at the time of the murder. The courts were just outside her apartment at the Westbay Club in West L.A. She claimed she suspected nothing when she first walked into her apartment, rackets in hand. Earlier, she had told David Landmaier to go in and mix himself a drink. When she did not see him in her livingroom and tried to enter the kitchenette, the swinging door pushed against his inert body. She was confused as to what happened next, but said she had not gotten a clear look at the scene in the kitchen. When she saw Landmaier's head and upper torso and a lot of blood, she backed up and started screaming. The papers went on to say that he had been shot with a small caliber weapon and had bled to death. Some shattered glassware seemed to indicate that Landmaier had been mixing two drinks when he was murdered. No one had been seen entering or leaving the apartment's two entrances except Elizabeth Anderson.

"Why do the police suspect you, Miss Anderson?" I asked. "From

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what I read, you have an excellent alibi. The girl you were playing tennis with—"

"Is an excellent friend of mine," she snapped. "David was a strange, eccentric, weird young man. He was worried that someone was going to marry him for his money, so he settled over a million dollars on me when we became engaged, against my wishes. He also insisted on making a new will leaving me all of his money. It's at least ten million after taxes. The police seem to think that can buy a lot of alibis."

"Suspicion is not enough. They have to have concrete evidence."

"They have some evidence which convinces them that I am guilty, and it's making them work around the clock to prove it. I was followed to your office. They follow me wherever I go."

I waited for several seconds while she stared angrily at a ceramic ash tray on my desk, then she went on.

"When I found they suspected me of shooting David, I volunteered for a lie detector test, even before I consulted a lawyer. It made me furious to think that anyone would suspect me of murdering for money so I went down to Parker Center under my own power and took the test. It just made things worse."

Elizabeth Anderson turned that high-voltage glance on me again, but this time those incredible eyes were full of tears.

"When I got finished with the test, they said I had displayed guilty knowledge of the murder, and really began to crowd me. I could tell they were convinced that I had either done it myself or had it done, but they would not tell me what I had said that made them feel I was guilty."

"Do you have any idea what it could have been? You must have reacted to something they feel only the murderer or an accomplice could have known."

She glared at the ash tray again and began to clench and unclench her hands. "I've spent the last five days trying to figure out what I could have said. There were several odd words. The operator asked me if they meant anything to me, and they didn't. I'd never heard of any of them."

"Try to remember the words," I said softly.

"They were nonsense words like in Carroll's *Jabberwocky*, words like frabjious, calloo, callay, and maxnome. Then he asked me if I knew a lot of men and he rattled off about ten or fifteen names; names like Henry Mow, Randy Rome, and Max Tone. Funny thing! They all had single-syllable last names. But I didn't know any of them."

"You might have known one of them and forgotten. That would cause a reaction on the polygraph."

Elizabeth Anderson shrugged her shoulders and turned to me. "I

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don't see how you can possibly help me, Doctor, unless you could go to the police and find out what I did on that test that convinced them I'm guilty of David's murder. As my doctor, could you do that? Would they talk to you?"

"I could try, Miss Anderson. I don't think I can talk to the police directly, but I have a brother who knows the lieutenant in charge of the West L.A. area. They rode a patrol car together twenty years ago. I'll see if he can do anything for you."

We left it at that, and I went on with my practice for the rest of the afternoon. When we closed up for the day I drove over to my brother's bungalow in Mar Vista and had dinner with him and his family, then tossed the whole business into his ample lap.

Danny raised his bushy, gray eyebrows about a foot when I finished my pitch to him. "You mean to say that you want *me* to ask Lieutenant William Steele how his boys are conducting a murder investigation. Mike, old buddies or not, I'd bounce twice and land in the Pacific, at least halfway to Hawaii. You know how he feels about private detectives interfering in police matters, and you, especially, know how he feels about you."

"I'm not asking you to inquire about the case, Danny. I want you to ask Steele if he would be willing to discuss those lie detector findings with me. As a clinical psychologist, I may be able to help the police. If the girl has guilty knowledge, I may be able to find out why for him. I have her permission to do this. He cannot ask her the questions that I can under therapeutic conditions."

"And he can't ask you to tell him or the court anything that will incriminate your patient."

"True enough, but if I can prove or show that there is an innocent cause for her so-called guilty reactions, wouldn't that help the case for him? He may be chasing the wrong fox."

Andy thought the matter over, then agreed to try.

Next morning, I was granted an interview with Steele at headquarters and went in to see him with profoundly mixed feelings. We had, it might be delicately put, a strained relationship. While going to college, I had done some work for my brother's private agency, and while in the army I had spent nearly a year in military intelligence doing investigative work. Steele had the false notion that I was now operating a clandestine, unlicensed detective agency in the middle of his district behind the facade of a clinical psychologist's office, so I was positive that if I had approached him directly about the Anderson girl, he would have blown a fuse.

Steele seated me carefully in a hard chair facing a battery of bright windows and tossed me his normal wintry glare.

"Andy tells me you have a legitimate interest in the Landmaier

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murder. You know how I feel about your playing Sam Spade in this district."

I set myself to hold onto my temper. "I'm a Philip Marlowe man, myself, Lieutenant. Miss Elizabeth Anderson is my patient. I am concerned with her as a doctor, only. I no longer work for my brother as an operative. I have risen far above that. I now clear about four dollars an hour instead of $3.75."

Steele smiled, which is usually the sign that he is going to wither someone.

"I would imagine that you would be making a fortune with all the crackpots we have in West L.A. We not only grow our own, but we attract them in droves from all over the continent."

"My problem is that most of the crackpots don't know they are crackpots, Lieutenant, and don't ask me for psychological help."

"Except when they get into serious trouble with the law." Steele wiped off the smile and reverted to his normal, cool, flat glare. "Your client doesn't need a psychologist, Karlins. She needs an excellent lawyer. Her emotional problem is that she is guilty as hell."

"She claims to be innocent, Steele, but realizes she fouled up that lie detector test. That is why I'm here. I want to talk with your psychometrist and inspect the tapes on the polygraph run. If the girl is innocent, I can save you trouble."

Steele surprised me then. He didn't get mad. He just frowned.

"Suppose she is guilty, as part of her test indicates? Will you help us then, Mr. Clinical Psychologist?" he asked softly.

"If she's guilty, you will have lost nothing. You can't use any of that polygraphic material in court. With the money she has behind her and the legal protection she can hire, you won't be able to pressure her into any confessions. If she's guilty, I'll drop out of the case and you will have lost nothing."

Steele swiveled his chair around and looked out the window for several seconds, then swung the chair back again to face me.

"Fair enough. I'll cooperate with you on these conditions. What you get from me and the polygraph technician does not go to the press. We're keeping a lid on some details of the case. Agreed?"

I nodded and he went right on. "I can give you what you are looking for. I don't think you will get anything more from the technician but you are welcome to try. Your patient actually did fairly well on the test. She apparently does not know how the murder was committed or when it was committed. She did react, however, to something that the victim did as he was dying."

Steele swiveled the chair around to face his view of City Hall again and continued. "Here's the picture. The girl shoved the kitchen door open a few inches, saw the upper part of his body and some of the

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blood, let go of the swinging door, backed up and started yelling for help. She claims she never went all the way into the kitchen. When the neighbor went into it, Elizabeth Anderson says she was lying down on her livingroom couch with a friend patting her on the head. Her claim, therefore, is that she never saw what had happened on the other side of that door.

"The neighbor who went into the kitchen—he's one of those tennis bums who live in places like that—swears he never told her anything about what *he* saw in there. He was afraid it would further upset her. As for the two officers that arrived a few minutes later, they used their heads and didn't say anything to her either. When the detectives got there, they buttoned up the room. Elizabeth Anderson never got into that kitchen until a week later, after it had been cleaned up. Then she moved out.

"Now, here's what I don't want the press to get. Landmaier was not shot, as those reporters printed in their stories. He was stabbed several times with a large kitchen knife. Before he died, he dipped his right index finger into a pool of his own blood and wrote a word on the asphalt tile alongside of him, a name or a word that isn't in any English dictionary. He printed it in all caps, M-A-X-N-O-M-E, then he died."

Steele paused a few seconds, then went on. "Your client apparently does not know that Landmaier was stabbed rather than shot. She is apparently telling the truth when she says she did not kill Landmaier, did not hire him killed, and does not know anything about how or why he was killed."

"But she responds to the word MAXNOME," I said to Steele's back.

He spun around to face me, his ice-blue eyes narrowed. "When that word was thrown at her, she had a mild positive reaction to it. When she was asked if she'd ever heard of it, and denied it, she had a bigger reaction. When she was asked if she knew him or knew what the word meant, she had another positive response, a strong one. She knows what that damn set of seven letters means, Dr. Karlins. David Landmaier was trying to tell us something, and she knows what it is. You tell her from me that if she doesn't tell us what it means that she is an accessory to the crime of murder."

"She may not know what it means on a conscious level."

"Then you start excavating vigorously into her unconscious levels and help her find out, Karlins."

I cleared my throat. "Before I do that, Lieutenant, can you tell me if there is a Max Nome? Does this person exist?"

"Not locally there isn't," Steele growled. "Nor in San Francisco, Oakland, San Diego, Seattle, New York, or Chicago. We found one in

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the Philadelphia phone directory, but he turned out to be an eighty-year-old retired steelworker. We have quizzed every one of Landmaier's friends and relatives. None of them ever heard of Max Nome. He's the biggest spook I ever chased."

Steele passed me on to the polygraph technician, but he was right. I found nothing more. The test had been administered properly. She had been given all kinds of neutral names and nonsense phrases to which to react. Only to that strange name had she responded.

I decided I needed some background information on David Landmaier and went to the morgue files of the L.A. *Times*. One of my S.C. chums got me in. I found they had very little on him other than the bare facts that he had inherited his fortune at the age of twenty-five and had quit his job as an anthropology lecturer in a state college to devote full time to his hobbies. These were listed as the raising of quarter horses in Nevada, giving benefit performances as a zany amateur magician, drag racing modified sports cars in the L.A. area, and chasing girls all over the country.

I called Dean Ness and asked if I could talk to him about Landmaier and Elizabeth Anderson. He had just gotten home from his stockbroker's job in the Wilshire area. A few minutes later, I had a tall one in my hand and was sitting in an ultra-modern chair in his sumptuous livingroom, the kind of chair that I didn't think I'd be able to get out of without help.

Dean Ness sat cross-legged in the middle of the upholstered floor and frowned thoughtfully at me.

"How are things going for Elizabeth?" he asked gently. He spoke her name in the reverential tones that bankers usually reserve for discussing very large sums of money.

"Elizabeth is not quite ready to marry you, Dean. She is still grieving for David. Tell me, what do you know about him? I've got to learn more about him if I'm going to be able to help her. From what I've read and heard about him, so far, he doesn't seem to be a real person. He's more like something out of a comic strip."

"David was not a real person, Mike. He was a mystical lost soul with more money than he knew what to do with. He was haunted by the fact that it came in faster than he could spend it. David was a tall, good-looking idiot with a gift for gab, who thought the planet Earth was a gigantic fun house full of pretty, willing girls, magic shows, and bright and shining race cars. I wouldn't have minded his good fortune and his foolish antics and so on, but . . ."

"He took Elizabeth away from you," I said when he trailed off. "She seems to be a levelheaded girl. Was it all fun and games with her? Or was it the money?"

Dean smiled a twisted smile at me. "When he met Elizabeth, David

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professed to change. On the surface, he changed or he wouldn't have lasted ten minutes with her. She thinks people should do constructive work, so he gave benefit performances of his magic show, using Elizabeth as a pretty stage prop and attention diverter. He contributed his racing purses to her favorite charities. He stopped chasing the local talent here in Hollywood, flew to Vegas for that, instead. He even talked about establishing a foundation for medical research at U.S.C. But someone killed him first."

"Did you know many of his friends?"

"Elizabeth was kind to her ex-fiancé. I was invited to most of their parties. Sure, I knew a lot of David's friends. Why?"

"Ever meet one called Max?" I asked softly.

The effect was electric. Dean Ness almost dropped his pink daiquiri. His eyebrows rose half an inch and his mouth fell even more.

"The police asked me that. They inquired about a Max Rome or Nome or Mone, something like that. Who in hell is he? Did Elizabeth mention him to you?"

"No, but the police think she knows who he is. I don't think she does. But I hoped you would."

"Never heard of the silly weirdo, except from the police and you."

A phone rang in another room and while Ness answered it, I studied a silver-framed photograph of Elizabeth Anderson prominently displayed on an end table. It was inscribed, "Ever my love, Liz."

"Ever is a relative term," Dean Ness said over my shoulder when he returned. "That was my eternal-love-until-she-met-something-better on the phone. Elizabeth wants you to come to dinner at her apartment at eight o'clock sharp, tonight. I was not invited. I told her you'd be there, chum."

"I might have had something else planned."

"When ten million dollars invites you, you couldn't possibly," Dean Ness said with a sour little smile. People persist in seeing the world through their own eyes, I reflected, as I left him brooding in a corner of his elegant apartment.

I phoned Beverly and gave her my apologies for the dinner we had planned to have together, then called Elizabeth Anderson at the unlisted number she had given me and asked her where she lived. She hadn't had the ten million long, but already was assuming that everyone knew where she was. It turned out to be a quiet little floor of a large apartment building, where she prepared me a simple meal of corned beef hash topped with a poached egg, then launched into a series of probing questions about my visit to the police. She apologized profusely for the size of the spread she was living in, saying that David had insisted that she start living in style before they were married. They had leased it before his death.

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"You really don't know anything about Max Nome," I said, and she shook her head and started weeping again. "Maybe you don't, girl, but your body knows him. I saw the readings from you polygraph test. Your blood pressure, pulse rate, and galvanic skin response all react to that crazy name. Don't worry about it. If it's as close to the surface as those readings indicate, I'm sure we can find it's meaning."

She mixed me a double margarita and we walked down into a sunken conversation pit that had been dug out of the huge expanse of her livingroom floor.

"Tell me about the relationship between Dean and David and you. Were the two of them close friends at one time?"

"Very close. They worked together at Cal State as lecturers, shared an apartment in Santa Monica. Dean was the well-to-do one, then, and David the poor relation from the boondocks. They're second cousins, you know. They had no idea that David was going to inherit all of that money. When David had his shower of gold from a forgotten uncle in Washington, he moved out and started being the international playboy and jet-setter. Dean quit his job as an economics instructor and went to work instead as a stockbroker. I came into the picture then, met Dean at a party, almost got engaged, then ran into David a few months later. It may sound very corny, but it's true. I was swept off my feet by David. He was Sir Galahad and Lancelot and James Bond and the Count of Monte Cristo all rolled into one."

"What was he like? I never met him, you know, but I've heard strange tales about him."

"They're probably all true. David delighted in surprising and startling people. I don't know exactly how he did everything, how he gathered the information, but he made it a point to find out little things about people before he met them, their birthdays, high schools, phone numbers, anniversaries, everything he could, then he'd spring these little isolated facts on them in casual conversation or while doing an impromptu magic display, and surprise everybody. I went to a party in Westwood with him and he told all the people in the room what their mother's maiden names were. He told me later he got the information from a credit bureau at a few dollars a head. Another time, he had a dinner in his apartment and served each one of his guests, all fourteen of them, his favorite entrée and dessert. He wouldn't tell me at first how he managed to do things like that, but I found out later it was just hard work and drudgery. He would get the information and memorize it. When I became his stage assistant, I helped him with the lists and it was pure rote memory. But to the uninitiated, it was a miraculous thing. It really surprised and mystified them."

When she offered me another drink, I declined for two reasons.

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One was, I wanted to be able to climb out of that conversation pit. The first margarita had been that strong, and my head was buzzing. Secondly, I felt I had been given a clue to the mysterious Max Nome, and I wanted to break away from this beautiful, distracting girl and try to sort out our conversation mentally before the clue faded away. I left her abruptly and drove directly home, trying furiously to concentrate on what had been said, to review it so it would not die in my memory. All I managed to do at first was to give myself a headache.

I stayed up until one, jotting down everything I could recall, but it was no use. There was something buried in the mass of unrelated trivia, but I couldn't pull it out through the tequila fumes. I staggered to bed in a sleepy stupor, grimly thinking that if only I could have borrowed David Landmaier's fantastic memory, I could easily have dredged up the answer to the Maxnome riddle and then some.

Then began one hell of a night. It commenced with a lulu of a nightmare in which I was pursued down some very dark and twisting streets by a faceless, ghostly monster brandishing a bloody kitchen knife and yelling "Maxnome" at me in eldritch howls.

I awoke in a cold sweat, hoping that it would be at least six in the morning so I could get out of bed. I found it was only three fifteen. Trying desperately to go back to sleep, I was annoyed by an inane and idiotic phrase that began marching through my brain, back and forth like a huge saw. I tried to tell myself that clinical psychologists were supposed to be impervious to such nonsense, that people came to see me for help with silly problems. This line of reasoning failed to help, and the phrase continued to saw back and forth through my aching brain tissue.

Max Nome has pneumonia, that was the silly phrase. I tried to ignore it, disprove it, forget it, or destroy it, but it would not leave my poor, tortured brain. I finally sat up, turned the lights on, and tried to reason it away. I was using therapeutic technique on myself!

I told myself firmly that I was a fool to ignore the phrase. According to standard, classical doctrine, my unconscious was trying to tell me something important, and the only road back to sanity and sound sleep was to work out what it was trying to tell me. The unconscious is a devious and tricky thing, I reminded myself. Theoretically, it seldom comes out into the open and states anything directly. Instead, it persists in sneaking up on meanings in a misleading and wily manner.

The key word was pneumonia. Perhaps it was a pun, I decided after several moments of bleary-eyed pondering. What did pneumonia sound like? Like nothing on the planet Earth, I decided, and said the hell with Doctor Freud and his insane theories, turned off the lights,

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and tried to go back to sleep. Just as I was drifting off, a wispy little voice whispered the word *mnemonic* into my left ear, and that sat me back up and turned the lights on again. *Mnemonic* was one of those words I never spoke out loud because it raised far too many eyebrows. Still half asleep and wondering how much tequila Elizabeth Anderson had gotten into that one margarita, I wearily asked my unconscious what could the word *mnemonic* possibly have to do with a weird character named Landmaier and a spook named Max Nome.

The answer woke me completely. Landmaier was an amateur magician and memory expert who did complicated mind-reading acts on a professional level. Memory experts depend heavily on mnemonic devices to help them remember things. When David Landmaier lay dying on a kitchen floor and tried to write out the name of his murderer, his dying brain might have played a trick on him. Instead of the man's name, it might have fed him one of the many mnemonic patterns that Landmaier associated with that particular name, a pattern off a list with which Elizabeth Anderson had once helped him. *Maxnome* could be a mnemonic device for remembering something about a man, something with seven letters in it—or seven digits.

I stared at the telephone beside my bed and picked it up gingerly, then dialed the letters M-A-X-N-O-M-E. I heard several rings, then the crisp, professional voice of an operator answered. "What number are you calling, please?"

"Just a minute," I mumbled foolishly, not knowing what number I was calling. I worked it out from the dial. "Operator, I want 629-6663."

Several of the longer seconds of my life dragged by, then the girl came back on. "That number has been changed to 629-4562."

I thanked the operator, then dialed the new number carefully. The phone rang seven times before it was answered by a sleepy, angry, and familiar voice.

"This had better be damned important, fellow," he said. "Who's this?"

"It's your old friend, Mike Karlins," I said to Dean Ness. "I want to come over and see you about Elizabeth. I think I've worked out her problem."

"That's important enough." He sounded delighted. "Come right on over, old buddy. I'll pour you a double for that."

I told Dean I'd be right over, hung up, and stared sadly at the phone for a few seconds. "You'd better make it a triple, Dean," I said to the empty room, then picked up the phone again, and dialed the police.

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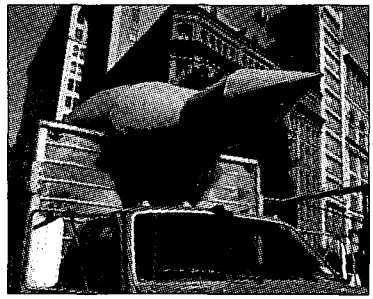
THE STORY THAT WON

The December Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Mike Befeler of Boulder, Colorado. Honorable mentions go to James A. Knoop of Clay, Michigan; Chris Laing of Kingston, Ontario, Canada; Frances Lowe of Orlando, Florida; Robert V. Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Doug Turnbull of Kingston, Ontario, Canada; Lorna M. Kaine of Oviedo, Florida; Sharon L. Near of Puyallup, Washington; Kent Ostby of Marietta, Georgia; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; and Joe Orth of Racine, Wisconsin.



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MISSING MISSILE

MIKE BEFELER

Boris smoothed the front of his Red Army tunic before climbing into the cab of the truck, ready for the May Day parade. Alexei's words swirled in his mind, "The plan will only work if you're precise. Five minutes on the side street and five minutes to reach the warehouse. No more."

With all the crowds, no one would notice until it was too late for them to stop him. Then he'd be compensated, throw away this itchy uniform, and blend in with the revelers.

What would be done with the missile was not his concern. He knew he'd have enough rubles to afford the luxuries that Elena aways demanded.

Boris admired the fake army identification card that Alexei had provided. Now all he had to do was complete his assignment.

After navigating the parade route, Boris turned of the main street. The driver of the truck behind him shouted, "Where are you going?"

"Just a little engine trouble," Boris yelled back. "I'll catch up."

The other driver waved and continued on.

Boris got out of the cab and opened the hood, pretending to fiddle with the carburetor. As he closed the hood, a small boy jumped out of the driver's door of the truck.

"Hey!" Boris shouted. "What are you doing in there?"

The boy scampered off and disappeared around the corner.

Boris climbed back into the cab, now ready to complete the short drive. He reached for the ignition. The street urchin had stolen the key.

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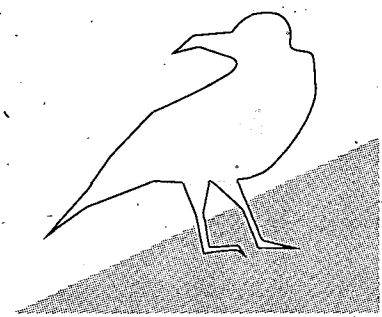

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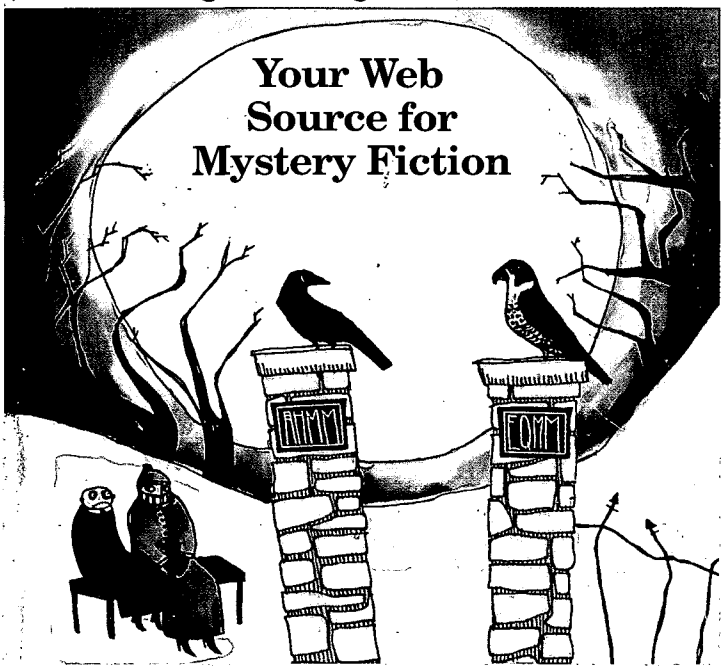

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